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Bernard Shaw as Dramatic Critic

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BERNARD SHAW AS DRAMATIC CRITIC

by

Martin J. Svaglic

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

VITA

Martin James Svaglic was born in Chicago, Illinois, August 27, 1917. He received his elementary education at St. Patrick's Academy, was graduated from St. Ignatius High School in 1934, and received the A.B. degree from Loyola University in June, 1938. Since that time he has been employed by Loyola University as an Assistant in the Department of English.

Preface

To the person who knows that Bernard Shaw devoted only three and a half years of his life to professional dramatic criticism, a detailed study of this kind may appear to be academic specialization carried to its most barren extreme. It is not. Shaw's criticism may be studied from many points of view, and in every case the results for the student of the theatre will be immensely profitable. It may be studied as an expression of the artistic creed of the playwright whose name is linked most closely with the modern dramatic movement in England. It may be studied from a combined historical and critical viewpoint, as a kind of running commentary on the state of the English drama during the years from 1895 to 1898, when the modern movement came to a sudden halt and all the progress since the days of Robertson seemed about to go for nothing, compromise between the old forms and the new being the reigning order of the day. Finally, it may be studied in its effects—in the influence which it has exerted, not only on individual critics and playwrights, but on certain trends in the theatre as a whole.

In this thesis I have attempted an analysis of Bernard Shaw's criticism from all three points of view. If I have succeeded only in the first, in clarifying the Shavian aesthetic, I shall be more than satisfied, however, for Shaw gives vivid expression to an ancient theory of art, long absent from English drama, which he himself subsequently carried to its highest peak of de-

velopment in the English theatre and which has found renewed favor in our own day. The elucidation of this theory, then, I regard as my primary objective, as it was Shaw's own objective in writing not only his formal dramatic criticism, but also "The Quintessence of Ibsenism," several of the prefaces to his plays, and finally the plays themselves, which are its embodiment in artistic form. At the same time, matters of historical and actively critical interest have not been minimized. Shaw and the modern drama grew up at the same time, and the first chapter of this work is an attempt to analyze and interpret the development of each until the moment when they finally came together in the memorable and hectic revival of the nineties. Then, with Shaw as critic (his principles are the subject of the second chapter), Ibsen, Pinero, Jones, Grundy, Sardou, and other leading figures of the day pass in review, the judgment of their contemporary is pronounced upon them, and the reader (so it is hoped) is given an immediacy of outlook on the transition which straightforward histories almost inevitably fail to capture. Shaw's judgment is analyzed in each case, correlated frequently with that of his best-known colleague, William Archer, and evaluated for its merits as dramatic criticism and not merely dramatic propaganda. The concluding chapter is an evaluation of Shavian criticism on a larger scale, which attempts to show that it has made a noteworthy and apparently permanent contribution to the development of the English-speaking theatre.

But a long preface is considered a confession of weakness (in spite of Bernard Shaw), and so before I confess too much, I had better bring this one to a close. One thing more remains to be said. I began this study with no

bias in favor of Bernard Shaw (in so far as that is possible to anyone who has read Saint Joan) and with a considerable amount of prejudice against him. I am ending it in a rather different frame of mind. It is impossible to consider the critic without also considering the man; and although the primary objects of this thesis are not biographical, I hope that one of its results will be to clarify (or to re-state, as the case may be) for anyone who may read it the nature of those qualities in the character of Bernard Shaw which entitle him, if not to the affection, at least to the respect of all men.

March, 1940

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I.

THE STAGE IS SET

Early Years: Scribe, The Well-Made Play, Robertson

The rise of what we now call the modern dramatic movement in England was paralleled almost exactly by the growth and development of Bernard Shaw. But whereas the latter was a steady thing (if slow at first), remarkably free from any real setbacks, the former was halting and fitful, alternating between advancement and retrogression, constantly testifying to the lack of any organized direction behind it. Had Shaw been thirty-four in 1856, instead of an infant in a Dublin Protestant household that was striving to keep its "respectability," there is no reason to believe that he would have concerned himself over the fate of a theatre which for fifteen years had shown not a spark of life. By 1890, however, when his dramatic opinions first made themselves heard, Shaw was beginning to find the English theatre worthy of his serious attention. What had happened to it and to him in the intervening years makes a fascinating study, although here we can do little more than sketch it in broad detail.

Paris, in the middle years of the last century, became once again the capital city of the dramatic world. Although no literary fanfare accompanied the revolution, for there were no Racines or Boileaus to act as its propagandists, the almost universal acceptance of its new model, the pièce-bien-faite or, as it came to be called in England, the "well-made play," produced a uniformity in world drama without parallel since the Middle Ages. It came

as a reaction both to the vogue of melodrama after Kotzebue and to the romantic and literary school of which Hugo's Hernani is the most famous product. Its originator, Eugène Scribe, "recognized the shortcomings of melodrama. He saw that to be successful with the people you must give them the illusion of well-being, you must flatter their limitations, and not ask them to think. Scribe discarded the drama of literary tradition entirely and proceeded to build his theater on vaudeville."¹

The well-made plays were written on the assumption that it was the theatre's province solely to entertain the average man. The average man was he who possessed certain elementary moral and social standards which the drama was expected to take for granted. Questioning and disturbing them was not his idea of entertainment. He was but slightly interested in character values and was content if the ingenues, confidantes, heroes, and villains were painted in broadly facile strokes. The story was the main thing. It was to have a surface realism which put little tax on his imagination and a superficial brilliancy of dialogue which flattered his intelligence. Cleverness was the chief requisite of the plot-maker. The neat and methodical unravelling and unravelling of the piece was to encompass tricks and surprises, pathetic incidents and happy endings—anything, in short, which might satisfy the sentimental longings of the drab-lived bourgeoisie.

Eugène Scribe had every reason to believe in the validity of some such diagnosis of the typical theatre-goer of his time. Between 1823 and 1861 he wrote or helped to write nearly five hundred plays, reaping an enormous

¹Thomas H. Dickinson, An Outline of Contemporary Drama, p. 24.

profit from their production, and laying the foundations of modern commercialism in the theatre.² Bertrand et Raton, Une Chaîne, Le Puff, and all the rest mean nothing to us today, but in their own period they were the constant subjects of fashionable conversation—every bit as important (and surely as good) as, let us say, the works of that modern international, Mr. Noel Coward. At the Comedie Francaise, between 1823 and 1900, there were more productions of Scribe's plays than of any other dramatist's, and the second most popular playwright, Augier, was in his youth a pupil of Scribe. In these years also, Victorien Sardou was busily engaged in perfecting his grasp of the minutely articulated play frame, an object which he is said to have achieved by reading the first acts of Scribe's works and writing the remaining acts himself. In the year of the master's death, 1861, Sardou won his first important stage triumph, and the succession thus remained unbroken.

The student of the modern drama, racing through the "barren years" of the nineteenth century, generally hears of the well-made play in some such contemptuous terms as the following:

It [the realist art] was in the first instance a protest against the most rigid of dramatic tyrannies, that exercised over the most feeble of slaves. The 'well-made' play of Scribe, and later of Sardou, with the pseudo-psychology of Dumas fils, held the European stage in the early half of the nineteenth century. In England and Germany its rule approached an absolute monarchy. In both countries the Gallic spirit was transmuted into an incredible puerility, sometimes touching that sorriest depth of all, a Teutonic effort after the delicately immoral. Attracted by the mechanistic neatness of their

²For an illuminating discussion of the Scribean movement, cf. Neil Cole Arvin's Eugène Scribe and the French Theatre.

models, the English and German playwrights lacked the skill to equal it. Sardou, a heavy, wearisome Sardou, appears most often.³

But this in the long run is apt to prove misleading, for realism as a mode is as much a product of the well-made play as it is of Ibsen. Realism in its maturity sloughed off the sentimental optimism of Scribe and the patent mechanics of his technique, but its origins are undeniable. Dickinson's version is more accurate:

He [Scribe] was the first journalist among modern playwrights. He broke away from the pastoral scenes of the eighteenth century and introduced the street scenes, the shops, the petty bourgeoisie of the new democracy. Above all he had the gift of measure. This gift was partially derived from a regard for truth. There was no pretence in him or in his plays. But it was even more derived from his infinite technical tact. Scribe never treated controversial topics. He knew the moral formulas of the average man, the limits he sets in his search for truth. He knew the average man's courage and his cowardice. He knew when he could be tricked and beguiled, and when his prejudices were unassailable. Above all, he knew that the basis of middle-class law is security. Security he made the guiding motive of his serious plays, for the woman security in marriage, in the home, in the exercise of the feminine prerogatives; for the citizen security in the State, in business, in financial relationships, in conservative opinions.⁴

Their portrayal of easily understood people in cleverly manipulated situations allowed the well-made plays to be as effective in one language as in another, and this fact, coupled with the laxity or non-existence of international copyright laws, paved the way for their conquest of the decadent

³Storm Jameson, The Modern Drama in Europe, p. 2.

⁴Op. cit., p. 27.

European stage. In France, Pailleron, Courteline, Decourcelles, Rivoire, Bernstein, Gondinet, Berton, and a host of others followed the Scribean standard. In Germany the lists included Raupach, Nestroy, Raimund, von Gottschall, Rosen, von Moser, and Blumenthal. In England the well-made play is associated with the names of T. H. Lacy, Tom Taylor, Charles Reade, J. R. Planché, Mark Lemon, James Albery, Dion Boucicault, J. Palgrave Simpson, Charles Webb and Henry Merivale. In the repertory of the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen, whose director, J. L. Heiberg, was an indefatigable adapter and translator of Scribe, one-third of the plays were by Scribe himself, and the remainder were written after his fashion. The apprenticeship of Henrik Ibsen was served under this influence, and nothing can better illustrate the ephemerality of the well-made play than the fact that of all these names his is the only one popularly remembered today—because he broke away from its bondage.

The England which had rejected Molière was only too eager to welcome the plays of Scribe and Sardou and their host of English imitators. The shrewdness and materialism of the well-made play were perfectly suited to the intellectual and emotional needs of the ruling middle class, and so it was that the theatre alone remained untouched by that spirit of revolt against the ethos of the Victorian era which is the life blood of so much of its greatest literature.

The years between 1840, which saw the end of the Bulwer-Lytton interlude, and 1865, when the Prince of Wales was founded, are among the saddest in the annals of the English stage. They failed to produce one playwright even of

second rank, they saw the alienation from the theatre of interest and respect among literary and intellectual circles, and they witnessed that wholesale borrowing and stealing from France which made the theatre all the more ridiculous because it was done so ineffectually. Of the mid-century playwrights (and there were many, for the abolition of the theatrical monopoly in 1843 had given the stage a solid commercial foundation), even the professed student remembers only Charles Reade, Tom Taylor, Westland Marston, Dion Boucicault, and Douglas Jerrold. The last named combined the worst features of the earlier sentimental comedy of Holcroft and Morton with those of the Scribean school. The result was a play like the phenomenally popular Rent Day, the story of which concerned the family of a virtuous farmer, about to be evicted by the wicked steward of the rich man's estate, the solution being accomplished by the sudden fall of 310 guineas from the lining of the treasured grandfather's chair! This sort of thing had the upper hand, but popular taste for the wildest of melodramatics lingered on, and Tom Taylor's utterly incredible Plot and Passion is its monument. Westland Marston, commendably enough, was trying to combine poetry and contemporary subject matter; but since he was a bad playwright and an infinitely worse poet, The Patrician's Daughter and Anne Blake were stillborn.

The theatrical horizon remained dark and unpromising until November 11, 1865, a date which, one may agree with William Archer, "certainly marks an epoch in the history of English drama."⁵ The epoch-making event was the production of T. W. Robertson's Society at Marie Wilton's and H. J. Byron's

⁵The Old Drama and The New, p. 258.

rejuvenated Prince of Wales theatre in Tottenham Street, London. As a play, Society is without value. It has no depth of characterization, and the action of the plot is wholly external, revolving around the successful attempt of one Sidney Daryl to regain his family prestige and the hand of his beloved by defeating a worthless interloper for the Daryl seat in Parliament. And yet, Archer tells us, it was hailed from the first as something new and charming. For one thing its atmosphere was distinctly English. More startling and more important for the future, however, it marked the first serious attempt at stage realism in England. The set for the garden scene, with its practical gate and railings, created a sensation, and the scene in the "Owl's Roost," a Bohemian rendezvous, proved amazingly convincing.

Robertson immediately became England's most popular playwright and the Prince of Wales its favorite theatre. Ours was produced September 15, 1866, and this time the "realism" took the form of reproducing actual weather conditions. Caste followed on April 6, 1867, at the third performance of which the revolutionary box-set was introduced for the first time. The Prince of Wales continued under the management of the Bancrofts (Marie Wilton and her husband) for many years, and of its 6,000 productions, 3,000 were of plays by Robertson. When the final performance was given in 1885 at the Haymarket, it was a signal that the Robertsonian vein had been superseded. Pinero later paid a most charming tribute to the whole experiment in Trelawny of the Wells.

Although Archer's quotations from Caste support his contention that Robertson was achieving an increasing command over everyday speech as a sub-

stitute for rhetoric and "wit," it cannot be denied that his real importance to the theatre is as a technician and not as a playwright. His plots are little better than those of the fifties, and Henry Arthur Jones, if intolerant for his time and in view of his own talent, summed up the only conceivable large-scale view of Robertson when he wrote: "It is of the smallest importance to be 'true to nature' in such minut and cummin of the stage as the shutting of a door with a real lock, in the observation of niceties of expression and behaviour, in the careful copying of little fleeting modes and gestures, in the introduction of certain realistic bits of business...if the playwright is false to nature in all the great verities of the heart and spirit of man, if his work as a whole leaves the final impression that this vast, unimaginable drama of human life is as petty and meaningless and empty as our own English theatre."⁶ It was perfectly true, as Jones remarked, that by 1896 Robertson had nothing to say to the contemporary world; he really had nothing to say in 1865, but his deeds remain as milestones. Archer's life-long thesis, that realism (which he cannot divorce from realism of externals) "is only the last term in an inevitable process of evolution,"⁷ makes him overrate Robertson, just as Jones' inability to be satisfied without that towering kind of drama which the modern English theatre has rarely, if ever, produced causes him to deny Robertson his rightful place.

Unfortunately for the incipient renaissance, the period following the early productions of Robertson's plays was almost as barren as that between

⁶Introduction to Augustin Filon's The English Stage, p. 12.

⁷Op. cit., p. 269.

1840 and 1865. Sardou had succeeded Scribe in the favor of the imitators, and his plays, together with revivals of such works as Masks and Faces and London Assurance, made up the bulk of popular theatrical fare. James Albery in Two Roses, a sentimental comedy about an inherited fortune, made an attempt to carry on the Robertson tradition, but he finished his short career as an adapter of Sardou. H. J. Byron, the author of some thirty or forty very bad plays, succeeded in becoming the most popular playwright between the ages of Robertson and pinero, and one of his plays, Our Boys (1875), filled with the kind of wit and punning that would be a disgrace to a third-rate vaudeville show, ran for more than one thousand consecutive performances. The plays of William Schwenck Gilbert are in no way remarkable, since his real talent was not displayed until the Gilbert and Sullivan interlude, which began with Trial By Jury in 1875 and became the only permanent contribution which this period made to the theatre. There was only one other development of note, one which was later to become the target of Bernard Shaw's most telling thrusts, and this was the founding of Henry Irving's repertory company and the revival at the Lyceum of what Archer painfully refers to as "the rhetorical tradition."

2. Direction and Intelligence: Dumas fils, Augier, Ibsen

In France, meanwhile, a reaction had set in against the superficialities of the well-made play. This was the beginning of the second great stage in the evolution of the modern drama, the recognition that no amount of technical realism could add lasting distinction to a theatre whose machine-made plays catered only to the surface emotions, were incapable of treating the deeper

human passions, and completely ignored the intellectual factor. It was this reaction which years later was to culminate in the best work of Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, and Hauptmann, the playwrights who were to bring the modern realistic movement to maturity and give to it that dominant place in theatrical production from which it has yet to be displaced.

Among the many before Ibsen who felt that the theatre ought to mean something more than mere passing entertainment, and who realized that in its present state the drama had completely divorced itself from any serious considerations either of art or human nature, none was a more active propagandist than Alexandre Dumas fils. "I realize," he wrote to Sarcey, France's leading dramatic critic, "that the requisites of a play are laughter, tears, passion, emotion, interest, curiosity; to leave life in the cloakroom; but I maintain that if, by means of all these ingredients, and without minimizing one of them, I can exercise some influence over society; if, instead of treating effects, I can treat causes; if, for example, while I satirize and describe and dramatize adultery, I can find means to force people to discuss the problem, and the law-maker to revise the law, I shall have done more than my part as a poet, I shall have done my duty as a man."⁸ These words (except for the reference to leaving life in the cloakroom) might well have served as the manifesto of the new movement, outlining a definite goal toward which it was to proceed, and laying the foundation for that sub-structure of didacticism which in greater or less degree characterizes most of its work, the good as well as the bad. It was through this kind of theorizing that rational intel-

⁸Quoted by Barret H. Clark in European Theories of the Drama, p. 382.

ligence entered the theatre as motive power. In the greatest drama, as with reason to faith in matters of religion, the intellect is inferior to the emotions—it is a less powerful and universal conductor of the dramatic experience. It may lead to a very high kind of drama, though of the second rank, as it did in the plays of Bernard Shaw; more often, in less capable hands, it results in the displacement of the theatre by a clinic or consultation room, as it was soon to do in France in the work of Eugène Brieux. The greatness of Ibsen was to lay in his power to keep the purely intellectual and didactic elements of his plays constantly subservient to the dramatic exposition of deeper emotional values.

Regardless of how much it was to be abused in later years, however, the influence of Dumas films was vital and necessary. He was the inaugurator of the highly emotionalized "thesis drama," the "play of ideas," the drama with a purpose. La Dame aux Camélias (1852), that famous plea for the suffering courtesan, marked the beginning of his attempt to give seriousness to the plays of Scribe. Each of his works was introduced by a long and serious preface which gave vent to his peculiar blend of sentimental liberalism and increased his popular reputation as an original thinker, which he certainly was not. Dumas films never tried the intellect of the simplest person in his audiences, but he had the knack of using those catchwords and second hand conceptions which invariably succeed in flattering the intelligence of the spectators and making the reputation of the playwright—that commercially invaluable trick which S. N. Behrman has perfected so beautifully in our own day. His pleading was colorful and he had a flare for dynamics. Le Demi-

Monde argued that the courtesan is the inevitable product of society's distorted sexual standards, Le Fils Naturel discussed the obligations of a father toward his illegitimate son, Les Idées de Madame Aubray was concerned with the duties of a man toward the woman he has seduced, and so on. The limitations of his subject matter are obvious enough; "the revolt of the polygamous (or the polyandrous) instinct against the official monogamy of the West: the revolt, its pardon or its punishment—that is the true subject of the living Dumas and his theatre; but in his unswerving devotion, his postponement of every ology to the pathology of love, he is the master of them all."⁹

Emile Augier immediately accepted Dumas' opinion as to what the theatre should provide, but by temperament he was the exact opposite of Dumas fils. Wittier and more adept at characterization, he set himself up as a stabilizing force in the social order, a defender of the status quo in the tradition of the classical dramatists, and, Scribe excepted, he became the most popular playwright in France. L'Aventurière pleaded for the protection of the home against the dangerous woman, Les Lionnes Pauvres attacked the insidious effects of the new lax morality, and Le Mariage d'Olympe was a direct reply to Camille. Augier managed to be less didactic than Dumas, to keep the justification for his plays at least partially within their own structure, and thus it is that even today he still retains something of his old reputation, while Dumas fils has become thoroughly dated.

In England the pioneer work of these men had almost no immediate influence. In Germany, however, Karl Gutzkow and Heinrich Laube, leading play-

⁹A. B. Walkley, Playhouse Impressions, p. 75.

wrights of the Young Germany movement, proceeded in this fashion and prepared the way for Sudermann and Hauptmann. Most important of all, Henrik Ibsen, of whom later we shall have much to say, having developed the Scribean model as much as possible between 1855 (Lady Inger of Ostrat) and 1869 (The League of Youth), turned definitely in the direction of Dumas files and lifted the play of ideas to a level that remains unsurpassed. The earliest of his realistic plays, The Pillars of Society (1875), shows several traces of his French model, and though poor by comparison with Rosmersholm and Ghosts, it is head and shoulders above anything of its own day. By 1879, the year of that "Hernani of the modern movement," A Doll's House, he had become famous on the continent and was already enjoying a tremendous vogue in Germany. These two plays, as Miss Jameson well says, marked the change "from the artifice of external movement, to the art of spiritual movement,"¹⁰ and consummated the theories of Dumas files. We may leave Ibsen, for the moment, thinking of his influence in Dickinson's terms:

Ibsen's position as playwright is dominated and defined by a single fact: he is the playwright of the responsible, thinking being. For the theatre he accepts the doctrine, 'I think, therefore I am.' All of the characters in Ibsen's plays, even the servants, of whom he has but few, are thought-directed, thought-energized...Their strengths as well as their weaknesses appertain to them as thoughtful and self-responsible persons...With those dead souls which have not yet risen to awareness he is no more concerned than Shakespeare was concerned with the classes below his kings, lords, nobles, warriors, and great money-lenders...In the tragedy of Ibsen as in the tragedy of the Greeks the action itself is unimportant. It is the motive, the impulse, the metaphysical clothing of the action that is important. And nowhere is this im-

¹⁰The Modern Drama in Europe, p. 73.

portance more acute than in the mind of the person who was responsible for the action.¹¹

By the rigid economy of his technique, Ibsen was also making an important contribution to the form of the new drama, and his earliest influence probably greatest in this direction, since the substance of the Ibsenian drama has proved capable of only the most superficial imitation by lesser playwrights. In France Ibsen has never been popular, but his powers were immediately perceived by the more advanced playwrights, especially Hervieu, de Curel, Donnay, Bataille, Brioux, and Leneru. Most important for the French theatre, they were recognized by Zola and furnished an impetus toward the development of the theories which led to the emergence of that more distinctively French gift to dramatic technique, naturalism. Between 1873 and 1889 Zola wrote many plays, all of which were failures; his real significance is due to the fact that he was an untiring propagandist, leading his own followers in a group (the *Soirées de Medan*) that won high respect in literary circles and led to the founding in 1887, by one of its members, Andre Antoine, of the Théâtre Libre, the first and most widely influential of the experimental or free theatres soon to spring up all over Europe. Without these theatres, with their subsidies and freedom from censorship, it would have been impossible for the exponents of the new theories to get a public hearing. During the ten years of its existence, the Théâtre Libre kept up a faithful crusade for realism and naturalism, producing 124 plays, including among the works of foreign dramatists, those by Björnson, Hauptmann, Heijermanns, Turgenev, Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Strindberg, and introducing to their native land the first works of Paul

¹¹Op. cit., pp. 85-6.

Adam, Maurice Barrès, Eugène Brieux, François de Curel, Marcel Prévost, and many others. The movement, by and for playwrights, was highly restricted; it is a tribute to French open-mindedness (and a sad contrast to the situation soon to arise in England) that although the new ideals were often in conflict with the opinions of the ranking drama critics, Jules Lemaitre and Francisque Sarcey, both of whom were hostile to Ibsen, they were generally given serious attention and respect and, considering their startling revolutionary aspects, were treated with remarkable objectivity.

Germany was the first to follow the lead of France, and though Otto Brahm and the committee of nine which founded Die Freie Buhne in Berlin in 1889 were officially in reaction against French influence (Sardou's), their reaction pursued the path of the French Antoine. The first drama of modern German naturalism, Die Familie Selicke, by Arno Holz and Johannes Schlaf, was produced in 1890, and was followed by Tolstoy's Power of Darkness, Ibsen's Ghosts, and the great works of Hauptmann. Thus in Germany, too, the theatre had become alive, and not all the influence of the reactionary Karl Frenzel, the Clement Scott of Berlin, could stay its progress. A few years later Otto Brahm took charge of the now world-famous Deutsches Theater, which became the most vigorous continental exponent of Ibsen, the head of the naturalistic movement in Europe, and the best experimental laboratory for the artists of the new stagecraft. It was in the Deutsches Theater that Max Reinhardt began his career.

3. England Again: Pinero, Jones, and the Coming of Ibsen

William Archer was the pioneer member of that select critical band

which in the nineties became more famous than many a playwright, and in a sense Bernard Shaw, A. B. Walkley, and J. T. Grein were the disciples of Archer, if less narrow in their dramatic vision. "The father of modern English dramatic criticism" began his career in the provinces in 1869, went to London and became critic of the Figaro in 1879, and accepted the same position on the staff of the World in 1884, becoming internationally famous as England's most diligent propagandist of realism and as the English translator of the plays of Ibsen. Recalling this period, he was many years later to remark:

...I should not be speaking to you now if it were not my earnest conviction that thirty of these years [1880-1910] have witnessed a greater efflorescence of English drama than any similar period since the thirty years from 1590 to 1620, which include the whole life-work of Shakespeare. We have now no Shakespeare, granted; but I could name five or six contemporary playwrights whom I should be very sorry to exchange for any five or six of Shakespeare's contemporaries. No doubt they are not rhetoricians and lyric poets like the writers who flourished under 'Eliza and our James'; but that is because the modern drama has cast out the foreign elements of rhetoric and lyricism, and become a pure art of interpretation through imitation...this purification, this katharsis is not a sign of degeneracy, but merely the last term of an inevitable and most desirable process of development.¹²

For all his shrewdness and revolt and genial good sense, Archer could never discuss realism without affirming his faith in that cardinal tenet of Victorianism, the belief in progress through evolution. This makes it easier to understand the now apparently unwarranted praise which he bestowed upon the English dramatists of the pre-Ibsen stage.

¹²Op. Cit., p. 280.

The readers of Truth gave appalling proof of England's traditional insularity when in 1884 they voted as the most popular playwrights and plays H. J. Byron (Our Boys) and T. W. Robertson (Caste). Of course the readers were hardly to blame. English playwrights had not yet awakened to the fact that the continent was in widespread reaction against what Shaw later epitomized as "Sardoodledum," and the burlesque drama, the Irving repertory, the Gilbert and Sullivan musicals, and the well-made play still ruled the London stage. Nevertheless, according to the orthodox interpretation, it was the eighties which, even before the arrival of Ibsen, beheld the Dawn. The Dawn, in this case, is taken to mean the early works of two of England's most noted moderns, Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, and perhaps of one tremendously popular hanger-on, Sydney Grundy. "In so far as any one man can be called the regenerator of the English drama, that man is Arthur Pinero. We owe him a quite incalculable debt. From December, 1881, when The Squire was produced, until September, 1901, which saw the production of Iris, his principal plays may be reckoned as milestones on the path of progress."¹³ As for Jones, "he had done more than almost anyone else to prepare the way for the great modern creative period in the theatre...."¹⁴ The average student has heard such dicta time and time again; believing them, but unable to decide between the merits of the two, he has learned to couple the names of Jones and Pinero in the same reverent breath and to think of them as the great pioneers. That they were pioneers and even, in a sense, great, can hardly be denied;

¹³Archer, op. cit., p. 286.

¹⁴Wm. Lyon Phelps, Intro. to Richard Cordell's Henry Arthur Jones and the Modern Drama, p. vi.

neither, however, can it be denied that the uncritical praises of their devotedly misguided followers later spurred on the Shavians, the rebels against realism, and other groups to treat them with a wholly understandable, if erroneous, contempt. The essentially false simplicity of Archer and the early realists was again to blame.

It is true, certainly, and as a minimum, that Jones and Pinero (and even Grundy, though Archer can say little for him) succeeded in developing the Robertsonian model to the fullest. Jones was from his earliest days an avid theorist, Pinero a man of the theatre. Each was a conscious worker for a new realism, recognizing both the absurdity of plot and the deficiency of characterization then responsible for the discouraging state of the English drama. In their reaction, and even without the help of Ibsen, they wrote the best plays which the English stage had seen since the days of Sheridan. Pinero's reputation was established by works in a lighter vein, particularly The Magistrate (1885), The Schoolmistress (1886), and Dandy Dick (1887), three deft and pleasant farces superior in every way to their contemporaries. Pinero was justly hailed as a master of the stage, but he was wise enough to know that farces are ephemeral things and ambitious enough to attempt to make the realist mode a vehicle for serious works of art and more than a matter of externals. Two plays produced in 1889 before A Doll's House, The Weaker Sex and The Profligate, marked his first attempts in the direction of a higher drama. They offer abundant proof that Pinero, without the guidance of Ibsen, would have been an inferior "serious" playwright and an even poorer thinker. The Weaker Sex, by means of caricature and string-pulling, tried to show that

women should have no place in world affairs; it drew from Archer himself the comment that "some of Sir Arthur's best work is marred by a failure to keep abreast of moderately enlightened political and philosophic thought."¹⁵ What of The Profligate? Archer thought it "the strongest piece of original drama that the stage had seen for many a long year."¹⁶ Nevertheless, although it is engrossing and well constructed, it betrays Pinero's inability to grasp what was for Ibsen (and for Björnson, who had treated the same theme six years earlier in A Gauntlet) the core of the drama—the analysis of emotions and of motive which alone can lift a play to a spiritual plane. We are not concerned in The Profligate with the idea that finds Dunstan's expiation for his sin in suicide, with his deepest emotions, but with the exciting accident of his wife's eventual discovery that it was Dunstan and not the villainous Lord Dangars who had seduced Janet Preece. Intellectually the play is simple, and Pinero's realism remained largely a matter of externals, at least until the production in 1893 of The Second Mrs. Tanqueray. Shaw never thought it anything else, and even the Italian critic, Mario Borsa, a great admirer of Pinero, was compelled to admit that "the charm of his works does not really emanate from their thought, as is the case in the plays of Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Sudermann. If you come to analyse his plays in order to find in them a central idea, you will find that he has very little to tell you that is new, original, or interesting."¹⁷

Henry Arthur Jones, a disciple of Matthew Arnold, strove always to make

¹⁵Op. cit., p. 290.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷The English Stage of Today, p. 78.

the drama, for which, as we have seen, he had very high standards, a criticism of life. Testing his early plays by his own standards, we see that he failed in the same way that Pinero and Grundy and the rest of the pre-Ibsenites did. Of his first works in a serious vein, Saints and Sinners (1884), Judah (1890), and The Masqueraders (1894) are probably best remembered. The first of these has long since been put in the class of "epoch-making" productions,¹⁸ and with some justice, because of its prophetic portrait of a sympathetic character (a clergyman) in revolt against the orthodox interpretations of the moral law. Unfortunately this is secondary to a very tawdry plot depicting the betrayal of the heroine by the villain and her penitent death. In Judah the clergyman is the leading figure, driven to remorse by the inner conflict that follows the breaking of his sacred trust. Obviously it is this conflict which is supposed to be the play's center, but Jones' love of the melodramatic gained the upper hand. As in The Profligate, our attention is riveted on the physical action as such, the outer shell of the drama—the challenge of Professor Jopp, the scene in the old dungeon, the smuggling of food, etc. There is somehow a lack of balance: the play has been weighted on the wrong end, and the effect of the conclusion is weak. Yet Judah is surely a much better play than The Masqueraders, produced four years later, soon after the importance of Ibsen's contribution had come to be recognized. The latter is pure melodrama which descends to the sorry depths of having the hero win his loved ones from the villainous baronet by the cutting of cards. To this cheap and impossible plot Jones attempted to add

¹⁸Cf. Richard Cordell's Henry Arthur Jones and the Modern Drama, p. 52ff.

"seriousness" by tacking on some pseudo-philosophizing about life as a masquerade, expressed in the astronomical imagery of the hero. The influence of Ibsen seems to have unsettled Jones for a time, but in a few years he had gained a certain mastery in that fusion of act and idea which, as Miss Jameson observed, was Ibsen's supreme excellence, and which neither he nor Pinero possessed in the beginning. The eighties may have seen the dawn, but it was a long wait until sunrise.

Ibsen was a long time in coming to England, despite the untiring activity of his two greatest English advocates, Edmund Gosse and William Archer. Twenty-two years after the publication of his first play, Cataline, and five years after the publication of Brand and Peer Gynt, he was accorded his first mention in an English periodical—a review by young Gosse of the Digte poems in the Spectator of March 16, 1872. In 1873 the Fortnightly Review published the first translation of an Ibsen play, Emperor and Galilean. In 1880 Archer entered the field with a translation of The Pillars of Society, produced at the Gaiety Theatre in London. "For a quarter of a century," says Gosse, "he was the protagonist in the fight against misconception and stupidity; with wonderful courage, with not less wonderful good temper and persistency, he insisted on making the true Ibsen take the place of the false, and in securing for him the recognition due to his genius."¹⁹ But the battle was easy at first, although slow. Ibsen in book form and in critical journals was a figure known only to the intelligentsia, and the translations of A Doll's House and Ghosts that appeared in 1882 and 1885 made little or

¹⁹Quoted by Miriam A. Franc, Ibsen in England, p. 27.

no impression on the public at large. Henry Arthur Jones' insipid version of A Doll's House, produced in 1884 as Breaking a Butterfly, created no stir at all, since, as Archer remarked, it was founded on the ruins of the original. It was the eventual production of the genuine Ibsen's social dramas which precipitated a critical battle the like of which the English stage had never known. It was touched off by Charles Charrington's production of A Doll's House on June 7, 1889, which was soon and of necessity withdrawn, but which served to establish the critics as either pro- or anti-Ibsenites.

The head of the latter group exerted probably a wider influence than anyone then writing in England on the subject of the drama. Sincere, conservative, high-tempered Clement Scott guarded the morals of an immensely large family—all the readers, to be exact, of the morning newspaper with the largest circulation in the world, the Daily Telegraph. He was also the dramatic critic of Truth and a contributor to various other publications. Under the banner of the sanctity of the English family he enlisted the others who had seen in A Doll's House a direct attack on that institution. These were mostly, as one would expect, the critics of the widely circulated dailies, but not entirely so. Their ranks included Alfred Watson, May Thomas, Edward Morton, Robert Buchanan, and J. F. Nesbit, the latter representing the Times. To their aid, occasionally, came Jope Slade of Land and Water and The Echo, and several lesser figures. Archer, of course, led the Ibsenites: Addison Bright of Lady's Pictorial, Justin Huntly McCarthy of the Gentleman's Magazine, E. F. Spence of Pictorial World and the Pall Mall

Gazette, Joseph Knight of the Athenaeum, W. Davenport Adams of the Globe, A. B. Walkley of the Star, J. T. Grein, and Bernard Shaw. The last two were not as yet active critics, although in 1890 Shaw had delivered his address on "The Quintessence of Ibsenism."

It was J. T. Grein who served as agent provocateur. Heeding the call of Archer, George Moore, and others for a free stage, he organized several plays by Jones and Pinero for production in Holland in 1890, and with the proceeds founded the Independent Theatre in March, 1891.

So great was the success of these English plays at Amsterdam that the managers of the Royal Subsidised Theatre sent me a cheque for 50 to be used in the interest of art in England. At the same time I had received another cheque for 30 for the translation of an English play. With these gigantic sums, in the wake of Antoine of Paris, I founded the Independent Theatre, the first performance of which elicited no less than five hundred articles, mostly vituperating Ibsen, whose Ghosts inaugurated the movement, and obtained for me the honorary, if somewhat unflattering, title of 'the best-abused man in London.' In parenthesis, I should add here that this distinction clung to me for many years, that some families closed their doors against me because I had produced an immoral play, and that a well-known journalist, since dead, refused to be present at a banquet if I were invited. It cost me practically ten years of my life to overcome the prejudice created by an undertaking which even the enemy must admit has left its mark upon the history of our stage.²⁰

The performance of which Grein speaks was given on March 13, 1891. That the Independent was to be a theatre expressly devoted to such plays as Ghosts and the recently produced Rosmersholm was more than the anti-Ibsenites could bear, and in a series of furious critical attacks, now laughable and now

²⁰Quoted by Mario Borsa, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

pathetic, they made the name of Ibsen known to all literate England. Miss Franc's vivid description of the situation, though long, bears quotation in full:

Never has English criticism gone through such a month as March, 1891. The press became fairly hysterical and screamed aloud in its rage. The most staid papers lost all sense of decorum and, led by Scott, joined in the contagious orgy of abuse. As Archer has pointed out: 'If the play had been a tenth part as nauseous as the epithets hurled at it and its author, the censor's veto would have been justified.'

In 'Ghosts and Gibberings' in the Pall Mall Gazette of April 8, 1891...Archer had taken a wicked pleasure in gathering together the most absurd of the criticisms that appeared during this controversy.

For instance, the Sporting and Dramatic news affirmed that 'Ninety-seven per cent of the people who go to see 'Ghosts' are nasty-minded people who find the discussion of nasty subjects to their taste in exact proportion to their nastiness.' The Evening Standard described all admirers of 'Ghosts' as 'Lovers of prurience and dabblers in impropriety, who are eager to gratify their illicit tastes under the pretence of art,' and elsewhere proposed that the city institute proceedings against the Royalty Theatre under Lord Campbell's act for the suppression of disorderly houses.

Scott, in the Daily Telegraph of March 14, 1891, declared that 'realism is one thing; but the nostrils of the audience must not be visibly held before a play can be stamped as true to nature. It is difficult to expose in decorous words the gross and almost putrid indecorum of this play.' Probably finding the difficulty impossible to overcome, Scott compared 'Ghosts' to 'an open drain, a loathsome sore unbandaged, a dirty act done publicly, a lazar house with all its doors and windows open.'

This is merely typical of the English criticisms of 'Ghosts.' Ingenuity was taxed to its utmost, and every foul epithet known was utilized. Ibsen's work was described—to cull a few choice examples—as abominable, poisonous, disgusting, cynical, offensive, scandalous, repulsive, revolting, blasphemous, abhorrent, sordid, hideous, outrageous, indecent, noisome,

nasty, foul, garbage, offal, filthy, dirty, degrading, malodorous, loathsome, suggestive, coarse, crapulous, carrion, putrid, fetid, gross, bestial, sickly, delirious, morbid, unhealthy, unwholesome, etc.²¹

This amazing outburst made Ibsen and the modern drama synonymous in England. Although he was never a popular success, it is almost impossible to over-estimate his influence among playwrights. By 1893, 40,000 copies of Archer's English translations had been sold. English productions of the new plays followed as soon as possible after the originals. As disciples of Ibsen, in varying degree, Dickinson lists Pinero, Jones, Shaw, Grundy, Edward Martyn, John Todhunter, Granville Barker, Galsworthy, Stanley Houghton, Elizabeth Baker, Githa Sowerby, and Alfred Sutro.²² The nature of his influence has been well expressed by Archer: "...of indirect and what may be called pervasive influence, Ibsen had more, perhaps, than any other European since the time of Byron...What he really did was not to conform his genius within the limits of realism, but to show that realism of externals...placed no limits upon the power of genius to search the depths of the human heart, and to extract from common life the poetry that lurks in it."²³ It is strange that Archer could write so clearly of what realism at its best might do and then praise so many English plays which clearly failed to do it.

The revival of the nineties was now in full swing. The Independent Theatre was experimenting with the naturalism of Zola and George Moore, before producing a play called Widowers' Houses. Walkley gaily launched an attack on the still popular well-made play, attempting to laugh it off the

²¹Ibsen in England, pp. 37-38.

²²An Outline of Contemporary Drama, p. 95.

²³The Old Drama and The New, p. 308.

stage. ("When it is he [Sardou] who finds the formula, you may depend upon the clock going, and for considerably more than eight days. There are formulas and formulas, but Sardou's is practically one."²⁴) Between 1889 and 1894, on the continent as a whole, appeared the first successful plays of Wilde, Shaw, Hauptmann, Sudermann, Wedekind, Maeterlinck, Rostand, Schnitzler, and von Hoffmannsthal, while Brieux, Pinero, Jones, Strindberg, Galdos, and many others developed anew. Clement Scott grew ever more rabidly anti-modernist (although in the days of Robertson he had been a pioneer realist), and in 1892 he went so far as to attack the personal character of William Archer. The Oscar Wilde interlude captivated London, and to some extent appeased both parties. By 1894 England had her own Ibsen—Arthur Wing Pinero, who by virtue of The Second Mrs. Tanqueray had come to be recognized as the foremost native exponent of the modern drama. To most observers it seemed that a most brilliant dramatic renaissance was already in progress. But there were those who disagreed.

4. Enter G. B. S.

The theatre and the arts in general were somewhat removed from the immediate concerns of Bernard Shaw when in 1876, as a youth of twenty, he forsook a drab, uneventful life in Dublin and followed his mother and sister to London. This, of course, was just as well, since as we have seen the English theatre was at the time practically non-existent. London was indeed the place where "he was to set the crystalline intellectual clarity, the philo-

²⁴A. B. Walkley, Playhouse Impressions, p. 83.

sophic consciousness of the brilliant Celt, into sharp juxtaposition with the plodding practicality, the dogged energy of the complacent Briton...to find the arena for his championship of those advanced movements in art, literature, music, and politics, which gave significance and character to the closing quarter of the nineteenth century."²⁵ But in the years between his arrival in 1876 and the beginning of his critical career in 1885, he had a very difficult time of it, once admitting that his earnings during this period amounted to exactly six pounds! He hated business and gave it up after attempting in 1879 to exploit a new Edison invention, not, however, before he had "laid the foundation of Mr. Edison's London reputation."²⁶ Receiving support from his parents, he turned to literature, beginning with a Passion Play in blank verse, "with the mother of the hero represented as a termagant."²⁷ This he soon thought better of and promptly became a diligent, if unsuccessful, novelist. Immaturity, Cashel Byron's Profession, The Irrational Knot, Love Among the Artists, and An Unsocial Socialist belong to the years between 1879 and 1883. Marred by erratic characterization, extreme didacticism, and long discussions, they yet foreshadow the work of the future dramatist. The first had the distinction of being turned down by George Meredith for Chapman and Hall, but the others soon found profitless publication in the Socialist magazine Truth and in Annie Besant's Our Corner. They won the respectful attention of William Morris, Henley, Archer, Stevenson, and the Saturday Review, and Shaw found himself a minor but welcome

²⁵Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw, p. 26.

²⁶Shaw quoted by Henderson, op. cit., p. 43.

²⁷Ibid., p. 42.

figure in a select literary circle.

The palace of art, however, could not be completely satisfying to a man of Shaw's energetic and intensely practical character. During the writing of the novels he became acquainted with James Lecky and others who stimulated his interest in public speaking, phonetics, etc. He joined the Millite Zoetical Society, to which Sidney Webb belonged, the Dialectical Society, and the Bedford Society, and in 1882 came under the influence of Henry George and his program for land nationalization. Through George he discovered the "economic basis" of society and began to make a most intensive study of economics. At the advice of several members of the Social Democratic Federation he read Marx in the only available copy (in French) at the British Museum, and it was there that Archer caught his first glimpse of Shaw—studying alternately Das Kapital and an orchestral score of Tristan und Isolde! In 1884 came the Fabian Society, and through many years to come, as its tone gradually changed from "insurrectionary futility to economic practicality," Shaw, writing, speaking, studying, made its work the center of his life. There would be little point for our purpose in giving a detailed account of his activity among the Fabians; it is sufficient that we recognize its fundamental importance in the development of Shaw himself. That importance is twofold: first, socialism and the study of economics made him "a man with a mission"; they gave him a vision of a social order to the realization of which he bent every effort, critical and creative as well as purely propagandistic. His new world-view acted as a stimulant to that strain of didacticism which had for so long been a part of his character,

and he felt nothing but scorn for those who made no connection between art and morals and the well-being of society. Shaw became, in other words, a moralist and a teacher. Second, the work of these years won him far more than the equivalent of the university training which for financial reasons had been denied him. His study of modern languages, philosophy, economics, and sociology was supplemented by regular and varied contacts with life itself, in all the complexity of its phases—contacts which admirably fitted him for leadership in a movement toward realism in art and which were denied to his best known colleagues, Edinburgh's scholarly William Archer and the Oxonian dilettante, A. B. Walkley.

The year 1885 saw the beginning of Shaw's career as a critic. When Archer, already drama critic of the World, was made art critic of the same publication, he felt neither interested in nor qualified for the task. Knowing that Shaw needed a steady job and recalling his interest in art (which came from self-education in boyhood at the Dublin National Gallery), he allowed Shaw to do the work and resigned the post to him as soon as he had become acclimated. During his four year tenure Shaw constantly objected to all that was romantic and idealistic in contemporary art, paid consistent homage to the studious realism of his great idol, Michael Angelo, and led a miniature crusade in behalf of Whistler. That his opinions created little stir is not surprising. The criticism of art demands more than an untutored, if sincere, devotion, which was really all that Shaw possessed; and even this devotion seems superficial and unsound, in retrospect, when one recalls that it was Shaw who a few years later, in the height of his characteristic

enthusiasm, championed photography as a substitute for painting. Or as his biographer puts it: "There was no great battle on in the world of art in London comparable to those that were yet to be waged. It is true that the Impressionist movement was struggling for life in London, and while Shaw defended it vigorously, neither its day nor his day was yet come. As an almost totally unknown, comparatively unskilled critic of literature and art, he could scarcely be expected to create the unparalleled sensations which he subsequently achieved as a Shakesperean image-breaker, a champion of Wagner and Ibsen, and the most radical exponent of the newest forms of the New Drama."²⁸

When T. P. O'Connor founded the Star in 1888, he made a place for Shaw on the editorial staff, but as his unorthodox views proved somewhat embarrassing O'Connor thought it safer to put him in charge of the music department. In this new field Shaw had definite qualifications, for he was a pianist of some skill and had learned much in his childhood from his mother and her great friend and teacher, George John Vandaleur Lee. As "Corno di Bassetto" of the Star and later as G. B. S. of the World he spent the next six years sowing dissension in the musical circles of London. Always the iconoclast, he damned the young Paderewski, French music, Offenbach, and the serious works of Brahms, which he found "insufferably tedious." Mozart was for him the great master, and although he had an exalted admiration for Wagner, he was not blind to "the defects of Wagner as a composer who failed to preserve philosophic continuity and coherence in his greatest dramatic

²⁸Henderson, op. cit., p. 196.

achievement."²⁹ In 1889 he paid his first visit to the Bayreuth Festival and, already interested in stagecraft, was quick to attack the faulty methods of production which he found there. He consistently annoyed the Covent Garden management and so infuriated Sir Augustus Harris, whom he like to remind that since Tristan was composed in 1859, it was perhaps a little overdue, that for a time he was forced to pay for his own stall. Since Wagner was to modern music what Ibsen was to the drama (neither was yet accepted in England), Shaw was looked upon for some time as "a colossal humbug" who knew nothing about music, though his opinions were witty and sensational enough to assure him many readers. For his critics he had a ready answer: "Don't be in a hurry to contradict G. B. S., as he never commits himself on a musical subject until he knows at least six times as much about it as you do."³⁰

On the death of his friend and editor, Edmund Yates, in 1894, Shaw resigned his position on the World. For some years now his chief artistic interest had been centered on the drama, which, under the influence of Ibsen, he had come to regard as the foremost popular medium for the inculcation of moral truth. As early as 1890 he had delivered to the members of the Fabian Society an ardent address on Ibsen which in the following year found publication as The Quintessence of Ibsenism. In 1892 the Independent Theatre produced Widowers' Houses, Shaw's very bad first play, and in 1894 Miss Horniman of Manchester backed a production of Arms and the Man, a brilliant

²⁹ Ibid., p. 241.

³⁰ Shaw quoted by Henderson, ibid., p. 250.

farce which, while commercially a failure, proved that Shaw as playwright had considerable talent.³¹ However, it was not until the days of the Stage Society that his plays found popular favor, and meanwhile he needed congenial employment, since he had already decided to continue in the theatre. The revival of the nineties was at its height—Ibsen had done his work and the old position was vanishing. At the same time a new danger had arisen. Was the mode of realism being developed to its utmost, were the English dramatists progressing toward that loftier goal which Shaw, Jones, and many others had set for it, or was the whole movement coming to a standstill as the influence of Ibsen degenerated into mechanical, uninspired imitation, and commercialism came again to the fore? Shaw believed that the latter was true. Characteristically, he was among the first to see what has since become a matter of history:

...with all this activity the main line of the modernist advance was diverted by a characteristic compromise on the part of the public. Ibsen did not pay; but it was felt that realism in a modern setting, if the themes in themselves were likeable and capable of a sentimental response, might be popular. Obviously the game would be to hearten realism with a dash of sentimentalism; in short, to water down Ibsen; not to declare that 'it is right to do something hitherto regarded as infamous' (vide G.B.S.), but to treat seriously in a play with no specific purpose, something hitherto considered as naughty, and therefore only deserving of facetious comment, and to call it a 'problem play.'...This actually happened. Oscar Wilde did it with A Woman of No Importance, Henry Arthur Jones did it with The Case of Rebellious Susan, and Arthur Wing Pinero did it with The Second Mrs. Tanqueray. It is not to be doubted that these playwrights were pioneers of the new movement, but it should not be for-

³¹For the amusing story of his attempted collaboration with Archer, cf. The Old Drama and The New, p. 342ff.

gotten that they were pioneers by compromise.³²

Shaw could never forget; for him there was no compromise. When in December, 1895, his friend and patron, Frank Harris, offered him the position of drama critic on the newly revived Saturday Review, he accepted at once. What he said about the theatre during the next three years won him "the reputation of the most brilliant journalistic writer in England."³³

³²Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, p. 212.

³³Archibald Henderson, European Dramatists, p. 338.

II.

THE QUINTESSENCE OF SHAVIANISM

To the casual reader, the most distressing thing about Shaw's journalistic articles is that they are not self-sufficient. Taken singly, most of his criticisms of music and drama are intelligible enough, and sometimes even brilliant; there are many, however, (and perhaps the finest) which cannot but seem ridiculously arrogant or absurd or petulant or cheaply paradoxical. The former cannot be fully appreciated, nor the latter even comprehended, without a knowledge of that all-pervading credo which since the eighties, at least, has motivated almost the whole of Shaw's literary output. "All his work is based so definitely on his theory of art and of life that to attempt to read him without some previous knowledge of his faith is to flounder helplessly in misunderstandings."¹ A critic formulating his judgments according to the standards of a well-articulated body of doctrine (the kind of critic advocated by Coleridge in the Biographia Literaria) is still the exception in the world of modern English criticism, although such a critic, when well skilled, exerts a greater influence and commands more respect, even among those who cannot subscribe to the doctrine, than any other. The expression of his creed seems to be a guarantee of professional integrity, and we are grateful for it. More complex than most, however, because more inclusive, is the artistic doctrine of Bernard Shaw, which may be compounded from his critical articles, essays, and prefaces. Moralist and teacher, Shaw sought unity in

¹Edward Wagenknecht, A Guide to Bernard Shaw, p. viii.

diversity, and each of his longer works consists in the application of this same doctrine to another field of human activity. In Shaw's view, the dramatist and the economist were working for the same end; "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" and "The Intelligent Woman's Guide" are two sides of the one problem, dealt with according to the same essential principles. It is these principles or standards, the exposition of which is our present task, that have come to be known as Shavianism, or the philosophy of Bernard Shaw. A rather severe critic has written of him that "he has a theory of life in the comprehensive and fundamental sense, but it is hardly deep enough or sufficiently grounded on positive knowledge to merit the high title of a philosophy."² True, to some extent; but for the sake of convenience, and in a world which has given the title to many a lesser figure than Shaw, we shall retain it, bearing in mind the reservation of this ex-seminarian.

Opposed alike to the romantics, the utilitarian rationalists, and the decadents, Shaw found his favorite artistic and philosophical companionship in the works of Bunyan, Blake, Hogarth, and Turner (apart from and above all the rest), Goethe, Shelley, Schopenhauer, Wagner, Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche. Of Dickens and Shakespeare he was fond, but to him they were concerned with the diversities of life rather than its unities. "'For art's sake' alone," he wrote, "I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence. When someone declares that art should not be didactic, all the people who have nothing to teach and all the people who don't want to learn agree with him emphatically."³ The sin of those who live in the palace of art is

²Joseph McCabe, George Bernard Shaw, p. 58.

³Preface to "Man and Superman," Works, vol. 10, p. xxxviii.

great in proportion to the talent they are wasting; the artist has no right to hold himself aloof from the problems of society. Conversely, the great artist is he who with refined skill and clearness of vision faces those problems directly and contributes something to their solution. Shelley as a mere lyric poet meant nothing to Shaw, but Shelley as poet-reformer was one of the noblest figures of his age. "No one can understand Bernard Shaw who does not give full value to this early revolt of his on behalf of ethics against the ruling school of l'art pour l'art. It is interesting because it is connected with other ambitions in the man, especially with that which has made him somewhat vainer of being a Parish Councillor than of being one of the most popular dramatists in Europe."⁴ When Max Nordau, author of Degeneration, startled the continent with his clever attack on the corruption of modern art, it remained for Shaw to give the brilliant and penetrating reply which has become one of his most famous essays, "The Sanity of Art." In terms reminiscent of Ruskin's he wrote:

The claim of art to our respect must stand or fall with the validity of its pretension to cultivate and refine our senses and faculties until seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting become highly conscious and critical acts with us, protesting vehemently against ugliness, noise, discordant speech, frowzy clothing, and rebreathed air, and taking keen interest and pleasure in beauty, in music, and in nature, besides making us insist, as necessary for comfort and decency, on clean, wholesome, handsome fabrics to wear, and utensils of fine material and elegant workmanship to handle. Further, art should refine our sense of character and conduct, of justice and sympathy, greatly heightening our self-knowledge, self-control, precision of action, and considerateness, and making us intolerant

⁴Gilbert K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, pp. 111-12.

of baseness, cruelty, injustice, and intellectual superficiality or vulgarity. The worthy artist or craftsman is he who serves the physical and moral senses by feeding them with pictures, musical compositions, pleasant houses and gardens, good clothes and fine implements, poems, fictions, essays, and dramas which call the heightened senses and ennobled faculties into pleasurable activity. The great artist is he who goes a step beyond the demand, and by supplying work of a higher beauty and a higher interest than have yet been perceived, succeeds, after a brief struggle with its strangeness, in adding this fresh extension of sense to the heritage of the race.⁵

When Shaw assumed his duties as dramatic critic of the Saturday Review, then, he brought with him a matured artistic creed, the product of his previous social, political, and critical experiences, of his own beginnings as a playwright, and especially of his Ibsen discipleship. For him the theatre was inseparably linked with every phase of human thought and activity, and if it failed to keep abreast of changing conceptions in morals and sociology, no mere economy in plot structure could heighten its value. "I set up my own standard of what the drama should be and how it should be presented; and I used all my art to make every deviation in aiming at this standard, every recalcitrance in approaching it, every refusal to accept it seem ridiculous and old fashioned." And he significantly adds: "In this, however, I only did what all critics do who are worth their salt."⁶ Let us examine this standard more closely.

Although Shaw could never concede that the importance of a play's subject-matter is sufficient recompense for any artistic defects it might pos-

⁵Works, vol. 19, pp. 328-29.

⁶"Our Theatres In The Nineties," Works, vol. 23, p. vii.

sess, his approach to the drama is frankly utilitarian. "Fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective means of moral propagandism in the world, excepting only the example of personal conduct; and I waive even this exception in favour of the art of the stage, because it works by exhibiting examples of personal conduct made intelligible and moving to crowds of unobservant, unreflecting people to whom real life means nothing."⁷ In its highest form the theatre was "a factory of thought, a prompter, an elucidator of social conduct, an armory against despair and dullness, and a temple of the Ascent of Man."⁸ Far from any idea of leaving life in the cloakroom, its excellence depends upon its fidelity to the things of everyday, or at least of "everylife"—to the truly natural, in other words, which must inevitably triumph over mere technical fashions. "An interesting play cannot in the nature of things mean anything but a play in which problems of conduct and character of personal importance to the audience are raised and suggestively discussed. People have a thrifty sense of taking away something from such plays: they not only have something for their money, but they retain that something as a permanent possession."⁹ And again: "When Ibsen began to make plays, the art of the dramatist had shrunk into the art of contriving a situation. And it was held that the stranger the situation, the better the play. Ibsen saw that, on the contrary, the more familiar the situation, the more interesting the play."¹⁰ In an institution as important

⁷Preface to "Mrs. Warren's Profession," Works, vol. 7, p. 155.

⁸"Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, p. ix. This is the creed espoused by Maxwell Anderson in the preface to Winterset.

⁹"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," Works, vol. 19, p. 147.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 155.

to mankind as was the Church to the life of the Middle Ages, in this new Church "where the oftener you laugh the better, because by laughter only can you destroy evil without malice," that quality called impartiality was a figment attainable only through indifference. The "mathematic-lifelessness" of the well-made play could have been tolerated in the first place only by critics who brought a large experience of stage life to bear on a scanty experience of real life. Nor was it condemnation enough to say that such and such a play by Sardou or Grundy was good of its kind: its kind simply had to go. "I postulated as desirable a certain kind of play in which I was destined ten years later to make my mark as a playwright (as I very well foreknew in the depth of my own unconsciousness); and I brought everybody, authors, actors, managers, to the one test: were they coming my way or staying in the old grooves?"¹¹

It was Ibsen's great distinction, according to Shaw, to have recognized that the type of play in which the moral solution is highly obvious was not meant for intelligent people, and to have substituted for the clever piece of knot-tying a discussion of moral values. This was the essence of realism. "The serious playwright recognizes in the discussion not only the main test of his highest powers, but also the real centre of the play's interest... This was inevitable if the drama was ever again to be raised above the childish demand for fables without morals."¹² The dramatic conflict should involve the spectators as well as the actors. The greatest service which the

¹¹"Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, p. vii.

¹²"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," p. 145.

theatre can render to most men, hidebound as they are by unreasoned and untested codes of ethical and social convention, is to take their sham ideals and unsettle them, which was what Ibsen did. "A generation which could read all Shakespeare and Molière, Dickens and Dumas, from end to end without the slightest intellectual or ethical perturbation, was unable to get through a play by Ibsen or a novel by Tolstoy without having its intellectual and moral complacency upset, its religious faith shattered, and its notions of right and wrong conduct thrown into confusion and sometimes even reversed."¹³ And this was as it should be, for "when you despise something you ought to take off your hat to, or admire and imitate something which you ought to loathe, you cannot resist the dramatist who knows how to touch these morbid spots in you and make you see that they are morbid."¹⁴

Motivating Shaw's pleas for "a frankly doctrinal theatre" and his frequent references to the necessity for unsettling ideals is a philosophy which has for its summum bonum the perfection of man's nature, to be achieved in this life by the repudiation of all the ideals which mankind has heretofore objectified in the form of duties to existing institutions—to things outside of himself. It is the expounding of this doctrine, the heart of Shavianism, which is the principal concern of that brilliant tour-de-force called "The Quintessence of Ibsenism," or, properly understood, The Quintessence of Shavianism. Shaw himself has frequently referred to it as a philosophical work, and his biographer describes it as "a distinct contribution to that fertile field of modern philosophy, farcically and superficially

¹³Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 156.

imagined by Gilbert, mordantly dramatized by Ibsen, and rhapsodically concretized by Nietzsche. Let us disabuse our minds at once of the idea that this book is either mere literary criticism or a supernally clever jeu d'esprit. Not a critical essay on the poetical beauties of Ibsen but simply an exposition of Ibsenism, it may be described as an ideological distillation of Ibsen in the rôle of ethical and moral critic of contemporary civilization. To call The Quintessence of Ibsenism one-sided is not simply a futile condemnation; it is a perfectly obvious truth."¹⁵

In Shaw's view there are two kinds of pioneers on "the march to the plains of heaven—so to speak." In the present social order most numerous are those whose eyes are in the backs of their heads—"The man who declares that it is wrong to do something no one has hitherto seen any harm in."¹⁶ Since it is easier to persuade a guilty society that any apparently innocent act is guilty than that any apparently guilty act is innocent, the word of this man is accepted as a matter of course. The really great pioneer, "whose eyes are very longsighted and in the usual place, is the man who declares that it is right to do something hitherto regarded as infamous."¹⁷ Hissed and jeered at as a fanatic or a pervert, he is nevertheless the only true realist, since he can see through the false conventions which in the name of morality have been superimposed on the natural order of society. The family, for instance, in the terms of Shaw's example, began as a conventional arrangement which society thought necessary for its preservation; eventually

¹⁵Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw, p. 271.

¹⁶"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," p. 15.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 30.

it was transformed into a natural, holy, and binding institution even by those who were unable to find happiness in the arrangement. The mask of natural sanctity was put over its real nature just as the mask of personal immortality was put on death, for the maskers would otherwise have found the apparent nakedness and futility of their real position intolerable. Such a mask or fancy picture is called an Ideal; "and the policy of forcing individuals to act on the assumption that all ideals are real, and to recognize and accept such action as standard moral conduct, absolutely valid under all circumstances, contrary conduct or any advocacy of it being discountenanced and punished as immoral, may therefore be described as the policy of Idealism."¹⁸ Let us suppose that in a group of 1,000 married people, 700 are making the best of the institution of marriage and 300 are domestic failures. The latter, rather than admit their own failure and face the scorn of polite society, will disguise their true state by shouting to the skies the praises of marriage as an institution. These are the idealists and their prophet is the first type of pioneer. The 700 who go along calmly accepting marriage as a matter of course are the philistines--the great mass of society. There is one man, neither idealist nor philistine, who is strong enough to face the truth without a mask; he is the realist, the man who has the courage to proclaim the falsity of the existing arrangement. When he does so, the idealists shocked at the tearing away of the mask, go wild with horror and appeal to the philistines (who simply think the realist mad), "specially idealized for the occasion as Society," for support. (Even granting Shaw's hypothesis, the

¹⁸Ibid., p. 30.

illustration is obviously fallacious, since it ignores the possibility of a fourth class—neither philistine nor idealist—which might, having made an intelligent success of marriage, proclaim the logical truth of the existing arrangement. Nevertheless, it serves to indicate the direction of his system.)

So it will be in every institution of society. The philistine will play the role of opportunist, while the real battle for social reorganization is fought between realist and idealist. The latter, clever and zealous (i.e., Clement Scott and the Daily Telegraph), will play the part of the staunch reactionary, blocking the path of progress at every turn. "The idealist says 'Realism means egotism; and egotism means depravity.' The realist declares that when a man abnegates the will to live and be free in the world of the living and free, seeking only to conform to ideals for the sake of being, not himself, but 'a good man,' then he is morally dead and rotten, and must be left to abide his resurrection, if that by good luck arrive before his bodily death."¹⁹

In terms which, paradoxically, are strikingly reminiscent of Lord Macaulay's, Shaw postulates that "progress" (for progress was his ideal at the time of which we write), or the conquest of reality, comes through the establishment of new institutions which involve the repudiation of older ones. It must always be so. The ancient conception of man's duty to God was repudiated and became duty to Society. Faith in religion became faith in Rationalism. But logical necessity does not govern life, and Rationalism

¹⁹Ibid., p. 34.

cannot explain the will to live; we still have faith in accurate reasoning but only insofar as it helps us to fulfill our will: "faith in reason as a prime motor is no longer the criterion of the sound mind." So that Rationalism must be repudiated and with it the organization of society which it has fostered, namely, Capitalism. For there can be no such thing as duty to a society which in its present form must inevitably crush Man. The perfection of mankind must begin with man himself and not with the forces outside him. Let him make a god of his own humanity, and soon his actions will be god-like. But this condition can be achieved only by preaching the repudiation of all our common conceptions of duty. This is what Ibsen did, and his works were unfailingly received by the shocked protests of those who believed in the false morals, conventions, and social standards of the concepts repudiated. This is what Shaw was to do. This, by inference, is the mark of the truly great playwright.

The point to seize is that social progress takes effect through the replacement of old institutions by new ones; and since every institution involves the recognition of the duty of conforming to it, progress must involve the repudiation of an established duty at every step. If the Englishman had not repudiated the duty of absolute obedience to his king, his political progress would have been impossible. If women had not repudiated the duty of absolute submission to their husbands, and defied public opinion as to the limits set by modesty to their education, they would never have gained the protection of the Married Woman's Property Act, the municipal vote, or the power to qualify themselves as medical practitioners. If Luther had not trampled on his duty to the head of his Church and on his vow of chastity, our clergy would still have to choose between celibacy and profligacy. There is nothing new, then, in the defiance of duty by the reformer; every step of progress means a duty repudiated, and a scripture torn up.

And every reformer is damned accordingly: Luther as an apostate, Cromwell as a traitor, Mary Wollstonecraft as an unwomanly virago, Shelley as a libertine, and Ibsen as all the things enumerated in The Daily Telegraph.²⁰

In his dramatic criticism Shaw does not insist, however, that the playwright be a professed follower of his theory. It is enough if he is sensitive to the real nature of the moral problems which thinking men must face, so that he can depict them faithfully in conflict. If he does so, he must inevitably make some contribution in the way of a saner approach to their solution. He may be traveling Shaw's road unknowingly, for "the existence of a discoverable and perfectly definite thesis in a poet's work by no means depends on the completeness of his own intellectual consciousness of it."²¹

Shaw's "substitution" of the will for the reason, proposed in all seriousness, verges on the ridiculous and has been attacked many times. This is his argument against reason: "...since all valid human institutions are constructed to fulfill man's will, and his will is to live even when his reason teaches him to die, logical necessity, which was the sort Voltaire meant (the other sort being visible enough) can never be a motor in human action and is, in short, not necessity at all."²² It is true that logical necessity or reason cannot be the prime motor—it cannot take the place of the will; its function is to show the will the place to take. The will to live is dominant because reason suggests that in spite of all seeming futility and frustration, satisfaction or happiness or purpose may yet be

²⁰Ibid., p. 34.

²¹Ibid., p. 14.

²²Ibid., p. 22.

found. "Ability to reason accurately is as desirable as ever; for by accurate reasoning only can we calculate our actions so as to do what we intend to do: that is, to fulfill our will; but faith in reason as a prime motor is no longer the criterion of the sound mind..."²³ When was it ever? Shaw the philosopher is in the position of a modern scientist who makes the perfectly sober announcement to his colleagues that he has reasons for believing the world is round. "To talk of deposing reason in favour of will is not merely to give bad advice, which Shaw himself never follows: it is to talk of impossibilities. Reason and will are the same mental energy in two different aspects. We call the mind 'reason' in so far as it is cognitive, and 'will' in so far as it is conative, and to confuse the two is simply playing with words...will and sentiment, which are the motive forces of conduct, cannot stir until the intelligence sets them in motion, or lights the way."²⁴ What, after all, but his reason determined Dr. Stockmann to oppose his will to that of society? Shaw, however, was at this time still ignorant of ancient and medieval philosophy. Schopenhauer had made a distinction between reason and will, holding what Shaw calls the 1750-1850 view of the will as original sin and the intellect as the divine grace that would save us. His subsequent pessimism was utterly foreign to one of Shaw's optimistic character, just as the whole society which rationalism had molded represented an abomination. Instead of simply attacking the rationalists on the ground that their reasoning was false, he formulated his moral creed on the baseless

²³Ibid., p. 24.

²⁴Joseph McCabe, op. cit., p. 73.

distinction which we have been discussing. The Age of Faith had given way to the Age of Reason, and now the Age of Reason must give way to the Age of Will.

In this final stage the moral law becomes the individual will. The impulse toward greater freedom must have full sway, and it is sufficient ground for the repudiation of any duty, however sacred, that conflicts with it. Moral codes and handbooks must disappear from a society of realists, together with the decadent institutions they represent. But this view of morality is "a symptom of the revival of religion, not of its extinction. He [Ibsen-Shaw] is on the side of the prophets in having devoted himself to shewing that the spirit or will of Man is constantly outgrowing the ideals, and that therefore thoughtless conformity to them is constantly producing results no less tragic than those which follow thoughtless violation of them. Thus the main effect of his plays is to keep before the public the importance of being always prepared to act immorally [as Nora acted, as Mrs. Alving should have acted, etc.] ...among those who are not ridden by current ideals no question as to the ethical soundness of Ibsen's plays will ever arise; and among those who are so ridden his plays will be denounced as immoral and cannot be defended against the accusation."²⁵ The orthodox and the idealists will argue that the conceding of such supremacy to the individual will can only result in chaos. As a matter of fact, Shaw argues, the removal of ordinary ideals as standards of conduct would deepen rather than lessen the sense of moral responsibility by putting man on his own and preventing him from hiding behind the simple rules that may often be as well observed by

²⁵"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," pp. 130-31.

the wicked as by the good. "What Ibsen insists on is that there is no golden rule; that conduct must justify itself by its effect upon life and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal. And since life consists in the fulfillment of the will, which is constantly growing and cannot be fulfilled today under the conditions which served its fulfillment yesterday, he claims afresh the old Protestant right of private judgment in questions of conduct as against all institutions, the so-called Protestant Churches themselves included."²⁶ This somewhat naive, Rousseauistic faith in human nature may have been Ibsen's or it may not (he was not given to the writing of prefaces), but we know that it was Shaw's. In the words of Chesterton:

Essentially it is anarchy; nor is it very easy to see how a state could be very comfortable which was Socialist in all its public morality and anarchist in all its private. But if it is anarchy, it is anarchy without any of the abandon and exuberance of anarchy. It is a worried and conscientious anarchy; an anarchy of painful delicacy and even caution. For it refuses to trust in traditional experiments or plainly trodden tracks; every case must be considered anew from the beginning, and yet considered with the most wide-eyed care for human welfare; every man must act as if he were the first one made....Some think that this anarchism would make a man tread down mighty cities in his madness. I think it would make a man walk down the street as if he were walking on egg-shells. I do not think this experiment in opportunism would end in frantic license; I think it would end in frozen timidity.²⁷

Obviously, if man did not have the help of moral science or of mankind in solving moral problems, he would simply not solve them, becoming either the wildest of anarchists or a hermit who feels that the world is too complicated to

²⁶Ibid., pp. 133-34.

²⁷Op. cit., pp. 114-15.

touch. The difficulty with Shavianism in its philosophical aspects is that Shaw never really said what he meant. He addresses his plea for moral regeneration to mankind in general, but he expects and wants to be followed by only a few men in particular—the elect, Carlyle's aristocracy of talent, in other words. For all his Socialism, or perhaps I should say because of it, he is fundamentally undemocratic. In "The Sanity of Art," he offers the soundly orthodox argument that there must always be codified formulations of law and order because the masses are either too ignorant or too pre-occupied to think them out for themselves. They cannot lead but must be lead—by the realists. The business of the drama critic is to educate dunces, not to echo them: "It is precisely because I am able to visit all theatres as a superior person that I am entrusted with my present critical function."²⁸ And again: "The artist's rule must be Cromwell's: 'Not what they want, but what is good for them.'"²⁹ It is not my moral sense that I must follow, or yours, but Shaw's or Ibsen's or Tolstoy's, and in the world of practical affairs (in his later years it has come to this) Mussolini's or Stalin's. Apparently it is only in sexual matters that the doctrine which Shaw outlines in "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" might be generally operative. For a good half of the world, marriage and the family no longer claim the institutional place that Shaw, in private life a man of the most irreproachable conduct, so frequently attacked.

In the early years of the new century Shavianism underwent a considerable change, one which saw the sloughing off of much of this confusing,

²⁸"Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, p. 97.

²⁹Ibid., p. 99.

theoretical anarchism. What had been a purely negative doctrine became positive—a Shavian god that was not Bernard Shaw had been sighted on the plains of heaven: he was called the Life-Force, but in this world he went by the name of Superman. Shaw had always felt the presence of some creative principle in the universe, and "Man and Superman" became the text of his new-found theology. It claimed that the Life-Force (not yet the omnipotent God of tradition) was in a constant state of evolution, attempting to express its power in the ultimate creation of a being greater than any we know today—the Superman; the perfection of the Life-Force. Man is but a stage along this road; he is the highest stage thus far reached, however, and must co-operate in the work of the Life-Force. This he is to do by the practice of eugenics, for the Superman will eventually be produced through sexual selection. The god of Shavian theology has paid humanity the compliment of asking it to work with him; if it chooses not to accept, it will be thrown on the scrap-heap, and the cosmic process will move on through other channels. The hell of "Man and Superman" is reserved for those who love illusion above reality, who place personal happiness before the welfare of the race, who shun all work. In the man of genius (Carlyle's hero) the Life-Force attains a measure of consciousness, and it is he especially who must work for the new order. Shaw, like Swift, wants to be worn out when he dies: "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap-heap, the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote

itself to making you happy...the only real tragedy in life is the being used by personally minded men for purposes which you recognize to be base"... (being employed as) "a pandar, buffoon, beauty monger, sentimentalizer, and the like."³⁰ Eugenics will result in an ever-increasing life-span, and the process of creative evolution will always move in the direction of spirit and intelligence and away from dependence on matter. It is this combination of Nietzschean philosophy and Lamarckian evolution (rather than Darwinian, in which the organism has no share in directing its own progress), dramatized in "Man and Superman" and "Back to Methuselah," with which Shaw satisfied his deeply rooted religious instincts. The lack of such a religion has even been offered as an explanation for his earlier preoccupation with social problems:

Shaw is, according to his most recent theory, an artist forced by circumstance into the service of social and moral reformation, partly because of the pressure of social and moral problems, which also turned Shelley and Ruskin into pamphleteers, partly because at the time when he wrote most of his works he regarded this as the true function of an artist, and partly because in this service he found a way of utilising his artistic powers, the true master of which, the god of a true religion, did not exist. Not till a faith based on the idea of 'creative evolution' arose from 'the ashes of pseudo-Christianity' was it possible for him to win the name of an artist. He claims to have won this name now, and supports his claim on 'Man and Superman' and 'Back to Methuselah' as being part of an iconography for the new religion.³¹

However much we may be inclined to smile at the outlines of this "scientific" religion, built up by a man who was neither biologist nor theologian, the spirit which motivated Shavianism, both in its earlier and later phases, re-

³⁰ Preface to "Man and Superman," Works, vol. 10, p. xxxiv.

³¹ Martin Ellehauge, The Position of Bernard Shaw in European Drama and Philosophy, p. 378.

mains a thing to admire. Shaw's greatest quality, said Chesterton, summing up his philosophy, is a serious, almost a tragic, optimism.

Life is a thing too glorious to be enjoyed. To be is an exacting and exhausting business; the trumpet though inspiring is terrible. Nothing that he ever wrote is so noble as his simple reference to the sturdy man who stepped up to the Keeper of the Book of Life and said, 'Put down my name, Sir.' It is true that Shaw called this heroic philosophy by wrong names and buttressed it with false metaphysics. That was the weakness of the age. The temporary decline of theology had involved the neglect of philosophy and all fine thinking, and Bernard Shaw had to find shaky justifications in Schopenhauer for the Sons of God shouting for joy. He called it the Will to Live—a phrase invented by Prussian professors who would like to exist but can't. Afterwards he asked people to worship the Life-Force; as if one could worship a hyphen. But though he covered it with crude names (which are fortunately crumbling everywhere like bad mortar) he was on the side of the good old cause; the oldest and the best of all causes, the cause of creation against destruction, the cause of yes against no, the cause of the seed against the stony earth and the star against the abyss.³²

In the phase of his work with which we are here most concerned, this second stage of Shavianism plays no part. The drama critic is the Shaw who believed in progress through the replacement of existing institutions (i.e., the moral code) by those which would allow an ever greater range to man's natural instinct for complete freedom. It matters not that this gigantic hypothesis is quite untenable in actual life, and that Shaw himself (by necessity, at least, a Tory) was the first to recognize its impracticability. Concerning it, a well-known critic has recently written: "It used always to be said of Shaw that he was primarily not an artist, but a promulgator of certain ideas. The truth is, I think, that he is a considerable artist, but

³² Chesterton, op. cit., pp. 105-06.

that his ideas—that is, his social philosophy proper—have always been confused and uncertain. As he has grown older and as the world has been shaken out of the pattern to which he had adapted his attitudes, the inadequacy of those attitudes has been exposed."³³ True, perhaps. But the fact remains that if we are fully to understand what the same writer goes on to call his "remarkably fresh" critical articles, we must make use of his social philosophy as a background of reference. In the first place it marks him out as a critic with something like an organic view of life, who measures his every activity in relation to that view. Thus, much of his criticism inevitably takes on the nature of what he himself has called a crusade; to the readers ignorant of Shavianism, however, his condemnation of widely heralded plays in a bitingly destructive tone will seem, much oftener than it really is, an attempt at a rather cheap kind of self-advertising, and to them Shaw will be not a whit better than, for example, his erratic, if clever, American half-disciple, Mr. George Jean Nathan. Secondly, this philosophy gives Shaw's espousal of the cause of realism claim to a firm foundation in reason, a distinction not shared by Archer and Walkley, whose reasons for defending the new movement are so often either superficial or patently untenable. Finally, it is the immediate basis both of his interpretation of Ibsen's plays and of his critical onslaught on Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, both of which will be considered in the following chapter.

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Along purely dramatic lines, two or three special articles of the

³³Edmund Wilson, "Bernard Shaw at Eighty," The Triple Thinkers, p. 229.

Shavian creed deserve our attention at this point. Comedy, in Shaw's opinion, is a higher dramatic mode than tragedy. The traditional view, which places the latter on a higher plane, has been the product of a warrior society more interested in death than in life. Comedy, considered as a representation of the forces of life as opposed to the forces of death, is the natural vein of this optimist; of his own nearly fifty plays, only one, The Doctor's Dilemma, is called a tragedy. But for him who accepted the title of "twentieth century Molière," comedy must do more than amuse. As "the art of disillusion" it has a precise social function, which is nothing less than "the destruction of old-established morals."³⁴ Since the one thing the English cannot stand is disillusion, they have no taste for real comedy, preferring farce instead. Meredith argued that their great quality of common sense is the basis of the comic, but Shaw, as the Irish baiter of John Bull, had never found evidence of this much touted quality:

If it were to be my last word on earth I must tell Mr. Meredith to his face that whether you take them generally or particularly...they are everywhere united and made strong by the bond of their common nonsense, their invincible determination to tell and be told lies about everything, and their power of dealing acquisitively and successfully with facts whilst keeping them, like disaffected slaves, rigidly in their proper place: that is, outside the moral consciousness. The Englishman is the most successful man in the world simply because he values success—meaning money and social precedence—more than anything else, especially more than fine art, his attitude toward which, culture affectation apart, is one of half-diffident, half-contemptuous curiosity....³⁵

For all the social satire of his comedies, however, Shaw is hardly in the

³⁴"Our Theatres," Works, vol. 25, p. 91.

³⁵Ibid., p. 88.

tradition of Molière. The latter saw comedy as a stabilizing force and accepted social conventions which Shaw would have been the first to reject. Whereas the characters who reject them in a play by Molière are made to look ridiculous, one cannot doubt that had G.B.S. written Le Misanthrope, *Alceste*, rebel against society (and to Molière pretty much of a fool), would certainly have been the author's mouthpiece.

There is something healthy and pleasant about Shaw's reaction against the old clichés of box-office interpretation, founded as they were and are on the assumption that it is almost impossible to underrate public intelligence. His own great financial success as a playwright is proof enough that profit and intellect are not sworn enemies in the world of the theatre, provided that the playwright is clever enough to be thought-provoking in an amusing way. (Ibsen was not, and he remains the dramatist of the minority.) To be sure, this is a dangerous course, and for many years now Shaw has been the victim of his early belief that torment is the natural element for an audience—that it likes to be talked to, and preached at, and despises nothing so much as an attempt to cater to it—an idea with its grain of truth so exaggerated that it has since become mere nonsense. The triumph of Shavian didacticism over drama is clearly foreshadowed in "The Quintessence of Ibsenism," with its insistence on the importance of the discussion as the center of the play's interest. Shaw once remarked that the only thing more interesting than a dramatized pamphlet was a dramatized tract, and that when the characters in his plays were charged with doing nothing, people meant that they did not commit felonies. While it is true that the lack of physical

or external action can be compensated for by a playwright who can make an audience follow patterns of thought as avidly as it would the progress of a battle (which Shaw did superbly in Saint Joan and has not done since), this prowess, rarely found, cannot be sustained for long. Shaw possessed it for many years, but he could not always recognize it clearly in others. Eugène Brieux is no longer taken seriously as a dramatist, but for Shaw he was another Ibsen. As for the latter, he took the greatest care to buttress the thought of his plays with external action that not infrequently borders on melodrama. However, we are not concerned with Shaw as playwright. Let us only remember that he had this unbounded faith in the eagerness of audiences to be taught something, and that it is a faith no less dangerous for the critic than for the dramatist.

Shaw's position on censorship is an integral part of his philosophy. "All censorships exist to prevent anyone from challenging current conceptions and existing institutions. All progress is initiated by challenging current conceptions and executed by supplanting existing institutions. Consequently the first condition of progress is the removal of censorships."³⁶ At the same time he is not "one of those who claim that art is exempt from moral obligations, and deny that the writing or performance of a play is a moral act, to be treated on exactly the same footing as theft or murder, if it produces equally mischievous consequences."³⁷ The latter statement, made in the same preface, is not a little confusing, for if seriously "mischievous" art is to be put on the same footing as murder or theft, it can only mean

³⁶Preface to "Mrs. Warren's Profession," Works, vol. 7, p. 164.

³⁷Ibid., p. 155.

that the fate of an offensive play should be decided by a judge or jury—a censor, in other words. But this Shaw will not have. He contends that the best censor is advanced (Shavian) public opinion, which will effect the ruin of an immoral work by withdrawing its patronage. As it stands, this is more than a little naive; we shall consider the more cogent arguments in Shaw's case against censorship in the next chapter. The fact remains that he was unalterably opposed to it.

Let us conclude this discussion of the larger aspects of Shavianism by again calling to mind the exalted position which the modern movement in literature and music had assumed in the life of Bernard Shaw. It was the seed of a new and greater civilization, and in his role of critic and prophet, Shaw directed all his energies toward the cultivation in England of a soil in which it could flourish:

The larger truth of the matter is that modern European literature and music now form a Bible far surpassing in importance to us the ancient Hebrew Bible that has served us so long. The notion that inspiration is something that happened thousands of years ago, and was then finished and done with, never to occur again: in other words, the theory that God retired from business at that period and has not since been heard from, is as silly as it is blasphemous...He who does not believe that revelation is continuous does not believe in revelation at all....³⁸

For the Catholic, at least, there is nothing strange about this great premise of Shaw's; and whatever else may be said against the conclusion, no one can doubt its sincerity.

³⁸"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," pp. 158-59.

III.

SHAW AND THE THEATRE OF THE NINETIES

In considering Shaw's treatment of the English theatre of the eightennineties, it will be well to bear in mind the words of his own apology, offered in retrospect many years later when James Huneker was making the first collection of the criticisms in the Saturday Review. Recalling the doctrine summarized in the preceding chapter, with its somewhat rigid views on the nature of art, Shaw reminds the reader that his articles "must be construed in the light of the fact that all through I was accusing my opponents of failure because they were not doing what I wanted, whereas they were often succeeding very brilliantly in doing what they themselves wanted."¹ And even more frankly: "I beg my readers not to mistake my journalistic utterances for final estimates of their [the playwrights', actors', etc.] worth and achievements as dramatic artists and authors; for I have never claimed for myself the divine attribute of justice. But some of them are not even reasonably fair: I must therefore warn the reader that what he is about to study is not a series of judgments aiming at impartiality, but a siege laid to the theatre of the XIXth century by an author who had to cut his own way into it at the point of the pen, and throw some of its defenders into the moat."² In 1931, the G.B.S. who once believed that if you do not say things in an irritating way, you might just as well not say them at all, permitted himself

¹"Our Theatres In The Nineties," Works, vol. 23, p. vii.

²Ibid.

to add, anent the Shakespeare controversy:

...a certain correction should be made, especially in reading my onslaught on Shakespear, but also in valuing my vigorous slating of my contemporaries for the devastating effect produced in the nineties by the impact of Ibsen on the European theatre. Until then Shakespear had been conventionally ranked as a giant among psychologists and philosophers. Ibsen dwarfed him so absurdly in those aspects that it became impossible for the moment to take him seriously as an intellectual force. The appearance of a genius of the first order is always hard on his competitors...If my head had not been full of Ibsen and Wagner in the nineties I should have been kinder and more reasonable in my demands. Also, perhaps, less amusing. So forgive; but make the necessary allowances.³

Observe, however, that while Shaw makes no attempt to deny or excuse errors of judgment, he retracts not one bit of the doctrine itself. We are left to infer that, after all, "what I wanted" was the thing to have.

The discussions which follow are not offered as in any sense a complete analysis of the dramatic opinions of Bernard Shaw. Each section (with one or two exceptions) represents a digest, an analysis, and an attempted evaluation of all the reviews concerning one particular playwright, actor, or institution. Only by this homogeneous grouping has it been possible to achieve a measure of unity. Although I have not consciously passed over any subject which Shaw himself deemed important enough to discuss extensively, references to lesser figures, to plays and authors of the moment, have been omitted as much as possible, and the discussions confined to a select group of key figures and institutions. To the best of my knowledge, none of these omissions tends to minimize or distort the most significant features of the

³Ibid., pp. ix-x.

Shavian method, and their necessity is obvious. I have quoted Shaw's own words on every possible occasion (fully conscious that they expose the inadequacy of my own), even though this practice has resulted in an appalling number of footnotes. However, it is much more sensible to quote Bernard Shaw than to attempt to paraphrase him.

1. The Interpretation of Ibsen

It is to "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" rather than to the Saturday Review that we must look for the heart of Shaw's Ibsen criticism. Following the great boom of 1893, as we have seen, the English theatre entered into a long period of compromise and commercialism which, to enthusiasts like Shaw, seemed a betrayal of the whole modern movement. During his years as professional critic, Shaw had occasion to review only seven productions of plays by Ibsen, and for one of these he had to go to Paris. Furious at what he considered the timidity and greed of actors and managers, G.B.S. availed himself of every opportunity to plead for more frequent productions of Ibsen, to praise him to the skies, and in general to act more as his agent than his critic. The actual reviews, correlated with the discussions of the earlier work on which they are based, are strikingly illustrative of Shaw's strongest virtues and most obvious weaknesses as a critic, for they are almost entirely one-sided. As interpretations of Ibsen's plays according to the realist-idealist theory, they are brilliant and stimulating and often conclusive; as criticisms in the fullest sense, going beyond interpretation, they fail to impress, simply because Shaw was so busy preaching the gospel of Ibsenism

that he could not bring himself to a dispassionate analysis of the plays as works of art. The producer and the actor are freely criticized but not the playwright. This does not mean that Shaw could not see differences in the merits of Ibsen's various plays, but merely that for his public he did not choose to analyze them. Never pretending to be impartial, he did not care to risk weakening an essentially noble cause by advertising the 'incidental' defects which the anti-Ibsenites would be only too eager to capitalize. For the most part, therefore, we shall be concerned with the confirmation—real and imagined—of his own philosophy which Shaw found in the works of his great idol.

The plays of Ibsen's first major period Shaw takes to be studies of idealism as it touches the individual life, and not the life of the ordinary person, but of men of exceptional imaginative excitability—men partly like the author himself. With Brand and Emperor and Galilean his theory has easy sailing, but Peer Gynt presents certain difficulties. Its hero is apparently a Shavian, having set for his goal, as Shaw admits, "the realization of himself through the utter satisfaction of his own will." For Ibsen this is the height of folly, and Peer, after a series of wild adventures culminating in his coronation by an assembly of lunatics as Emperor of Himself, succeeds only in losing his personality. Gay, fascinating, and poetic though he be, Peer is made to look every bit as ridiculous as Don Quixote. Now this could hardly be the fate of a true Shavian, and Shaw, therefore, is quick to point out that Peer has walked on the wrong path. He tried to act as if he possessed within him a special force (the ideal of his own making) that could

be concentrated so as to prevail over all other forces. He is ignorant of what he really is and of where he is. The demigod, storybook hero is a pure fiction that never has existed and never will:

Don Quixote, Brand, and Peer Gynt, all three, are men of action seeking to realize their ideals in deeds. However ridiculous Don Quixote makes himself, you cannot dislike or despise him, much less think that it would have been better for him to have been a philistine like Sancho. And Peer Gynt, selfish as he is, is not unlovable. Brand, made terrible by the consequences of his idealism to others, is heroic. Their castles in the air are more beautiful than castles of brick and mortar; but one cannot live in them; and they seduce men into pretending that every hovel is such a castle, just as Peer Gynt pretended that the Trolld king's den was a palace.⁴

Shaw suggests that the play might serve as a parable to the modern world, for this kind of unconditional self-realization is the common ideal of "the pushing, competitive, success-craving man" who is the hero of modern civilization. In Peer Gynt he is reduced to absurdity, just as Cervantes reduced the knight of the old chivalry. One is tempted to ask whether Peer may not instead be the Shavian reduced to absurdity, but Shaw might answer, as Chesterton answered for him, that the true Shavian is a man of prudence and caution and painful delicacy. Certainly his superb exposition of this difficult play is remarkably clear and convincing—so much so that even the most hardened sceptic must find it hard to doubt that for the plays of the first period, at least, Shaw did actually seize upon the quintessence of Ibsenism.

When in 1896 M. Lugné-Poë's Theatre de l'Oeuvre produced Peer Gynt, shortly after its French translation by Count Prozor, Shaw made the journey

⁴"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," Works, vol. 19, pp. 52-3.

to Paris in order to review it. England had not yet seen it produced, though Archer's translation had been available for several years, and in the stronghold of Scribe and Sardou, Shaw bewailed the fact that "Paris, that belated capital which makes the intelligent Englishman imagine himself back in the Dublin or Edinburgh of the eighteenth century, has been beforehand with us in producing Peer Gynt."⁵ He saw an indifferent performance, poorly set, which lasted four hours in a severely cut version. Yet his enthusiasm for the play itself remained as strong as ever. He prophesied that "Peer Gynt will finally smash anti-Ibsenism in Europe, because Peer is everybody's hero. He has the same effect on the imagination that Hamlet, Faust, and Mozart's Don Juan have had."⁶ But the prophecy has yet to be fulfilled. Whatever the merits of Peer Gynt, and it is perhaps Ibsen's greatest work, it offers well-nigh insuperable difficulties to any director. In some respects it approaches the anti-dramatic, with its inordinate length and great scenic requirements, and even with the advances of modern stagecraft it is difficult to imagine a wholly satisfactory performance. It would be very wrong to call this intensely dramatic and moving play a closet drama, but at the same time it can smash anti-Ibsenism much more swiftly in the study than on the stage. One almost never hears of a production of Peer Gynt in our own day, and the reason is clear enough. Shaw, however, disappointedly watching what he had always considered one of Europe's finest companies, blamed all the faults on the production, and seems never to have considered questioning the practical or stage wisdom of the playwright.

⁵"Our Theatres," vol. 24, p. 260.

⁶Ibid.

In the second period we have what Shaw calls "the objective anti-ideal-ist" plays, in which Ibsen turned to the depiction of idealism as a social force in the lives of people quite unlike himself—people of the everyday world. Shaw feels that the first of these, The Pillars of Society, is somewhat weak as a social document, since Karsten Bernick is an obviously fraudulent hypocrite who would hardly be accepted as a "pillar" by the class he represents. Having recognized as much, we are told, Ibsen remedied this defect in A Doll's House by making Torvald Helmer a model husband, father, and citizen, and giving him the family of the idealist's dream. Shaw then goes cleverly on, working up to the collapse of the ideal and the repudiation of Nora's duty to it. As he wrote, on seeing the play again in 1897:

The slam of the door behind her is more momentous than the cannon of Waterloo or Sedan, because when she comes back, it will not be to the old home; for when the patriarch no longer rules, and the 'breadwinner' acknowledges his dependence, there is an end of the old order; and an institution upon which so much human affection and suffering have been lavished, and about which so much experience of the holiest right and bitterest wrong has gathered, cannot fall without moving even its destroyers, much more those who believe that its extirpation is a mortal wound to society.⁷

Now this is at least questionable. Torvald Helmer, a cad, a weakling, and pretty much of a fool, is no more acceptable to the idealist (or anyone else) as a father and a husband than is Bernick as a citizen. Nora Helmer, a heroine of slow-moving intellect, finally realizes as much. She tells him exactly the way she feels and then, knowing that each of them must undergo a period of readjustment, leaves him—to return again if and when he becomes a

⁷Ibid., vol. 25, p. 137.

human being. Shaw, naturally, emphasizes whatever seems to support his theory, and thus he views Nora's dramatic exit as a repudiation of the traditional ties of marriage and the family, as for that matter did the shocked anti-Ibsenites. There is no positive way of disproving Shaw's interpretation, for that Ibsen's position was extremely "advanced" cannot be denied. And yet even without minimizing the implications of Nora's action, it is impossible not to feel that A Doll's House is primarily the story of the domestic crises of two by no means typical people, and that any emphasis which makes it first an attack on marriage itself is definitely misplaced. Why, if Ibsen was attacking marriage, did he sustain its bonds in Little Eyolf, in which the husband and wife seem to have much better reasons for living apart than Torvald and Nora? The answer is, I think, that Ibsen was not reforming or legislating for any class—that his own interest as a playwright lay in the problems of individuals for the most part by no means average; and that his solutions to these problems (when solutions seem to be suggested) do not justify the deduction of a philosophy from them. So that in an even wider sense than he intended, Shaw was perfectly right in declaring that the Quintessence of Ibsenism is that there is no formula.

Whatever may be said in defense of Shaw's interpretation of A Doll's House it seems to me that he is definitely false to Ibsen in his treatment of Ghosts. To call this play "an uncompromising and outspoken attack on marriage as a useless sacrifice of human beings to an ideal"⁸ is manifestly absurd—it is a contention in no way supported by the drama itself, and one

⁸"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," p. 71.

which illustrates most clearly Shaw's habit of drawing wider conclusions than his premises can support. We are told that Ghosts is the story of what happens to an "ideal" wife and mother whose husband has a huge capacity for sensuous enjoyment. Since society prescribes certain ideal duties rather than complete satisfaction for him, he is "forced" to seek his pleasures in underhanded and illicit ways. Leaving his wife to take care of his business affairs, he commences to drink and play with the servants. Now, argues Shaw, "even those who are most indignant with Nora Helmer for walking out of the doll's house must admit that Mrs. Alving would be justified in walking out of her house." Without a doubt. Therefore, why make her stay? Because, says Shaw, "Ibsen is determined to show you what comes of the scrupulous line of conduct you were so angry with Nora for not pursuing."⁹ To what point? The cases are hardly parallel. Shaw admits that those loudest against Nora—therefore the most dangerous idealists—would excuse Mrs. Alving. Accordingly, the only thing to keep her is her own sense of duty, encouraged in its error by Pastor Manders: once again Ibsen is dealing with an individual case and not with anti-idealism in the larger sense of Shaw's meaning. Seen from this point of view Ghosts is one of the most powerful tragedies in the modern drama; whereas, if Ibsen really meant it to be an attack on marriage, it is a miserable failure. The person who has no axe to grind can hardly be expected to watch these singular people become involved in a situation almost certainly without parallel in his own life (fortunately the Oswald Alvings are still rare), and then conclude that he has just seen a most devastating attack on

⁹Ibid., p. 72.

his present mode of living. The "lesson" of Ghosts is that Mrs. Alving was wrong—and that is all. When Shaw tells us that "Mrs. Alving is not anybody in particular: she is a typical figure of the experienced, intelligent woman who, in passing from the first to the last quarter of the hour of history called the nineteenth century, has discovered how appallingly opportunities were wasted, morals perverted, and instincts corrupted, not only—sometimes not at all—by the vices she was taught to abhor in her youth, but by the virtues it was her pride and uprightness to maintain,"¹⁰ we may smile at the attempt to lend her an epic-like stature in reparation for his early strategical error of admitting that society had not compelled her to be a martyr. But when he goes on to argue that Ghosts is the nineteenth century loathing itself, and that no other attack on it is so fierce, we cannot help feeling that he is just about as far away from the play itself as he can possibly get.

Shaw returns to Ibsen in his discussion of An Enemy of the People, treating it logically and persuasively as a refutation of the popular fallacy that the majority is always right. Nor is there anything to quarrel with in his treatment of The Wild Duck, which he sees as the first of a series of plays dealing with choicer spirits, "beginning with the incorrigible idealists who had idealized his [Ibsen's] very self, and were becoming known as Ibsenites."¹¹ On the production of this play by the Independent Theatre on May 22, 1897, the anti-Ibsenites were quick to hail the laughter which greeted it as a blow at Ibsen, something which he never intended. Archer and

¹⁰"Our Theatres," vol. 25, pp. 186-87.

¹¹"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," p. 81.

Shaw immediately pointed out that it was not unthinkable that Ibsen had a sense of humor—that he intended his play as a comedy and fashioned the exquisitely ludicrous character of Hialmar Ekdal toward this end. The air of exaltation which Shaw gives to his analysis of The Wild Duck is rarely absent from his reviews of Ibsen productions:

On Monday last I sat without a murmur in a stuffy theatre on a summer afternoon from three to nearly half-past six, spellbound by Ibsen; but the price I paid for it was to find myself stricken with mortal impatience and boredom the next time I attempted to sit out the pre-Ibsenite drama for five minutes. Where shall I find an epithet magnificent enough for The Wild Duck? To sit there getting deeper and deeper into that Ekdal home, and getting deeper and deeper into your own life all the time, until you forget that you are in a theatre; to look on with horror and pity at a profound tragedy, shaking with laughter all the time at an irresistible comedy; to go out, not from a diversion, but from an experience deeper than life ever brings to most men, or often brings to any man: that is what the Wild Duck was like last Monday at the Globe. It is idle to attempt to describe it; and as to giving an analysis of the play, I did that seven years ago, and decline now to give myself an antiquated air by treating as a novelty a masterpiece that all Europe delights in.¹²

Evidently Shaw also declined to interpret the tangled symbolism of the piece, for he makes not the slightest reference to it. Carried away by the whole business, he had praise even for the acting, of which he was ordinarily a very severe critic, and paid a typically Shavian tribute to Winifred Fraser for her continued success in the role of Hedvig. "The British public is slow," he wrote, "but it is sure. By the time she is sixty it will discover that she is one of its best actresses; and then it will expect her to play Juliet until she dies of old age." However, his Ibsen bias may have asserted

¹²"Our Theatres," vol. 25, p. 145.

itself even here, inasmuch as Archer, only too willing to be pleased, found himself forced to observe that "the whole production suffered, on the first afternoon, from insufficient rehearsal, the last two acts in particular dragging deplorably."¹³

Shaw's vivid and subtle exposition of Rosmersholm, probably Ibsen's greatest realistic play, is almost enough to convince one that he has been right all along. In this case he finds that the ideals are first, those of Rosmer, who as a clergyman regards the ennobling of mankind "as a sort of trade process of which his cloth gives him a monopoly," and second, those of Rebecca, the clever woman who desires "a noble career" for the man she loves—for her own sake as well as his, and that the purpose of the play is to show that such ideals, pursued to their extreme, have the power to kill physically as well as spiritually. He is careful to trace every change in the nature of Rebecca's love for Rosmer, as it develops from mere ruthlessness, through love of the man as well as of social position, to love of the man for his own sake, for this final stage is Rebecca's redemption or liberation from her besetting kind of idealistic tyranny. But if her character changes for the better, Rosmer's changes for the worse. When he learns the true story of his wife's death and of Rebecca's success in duping him, he loses faith in his power of ennobling others and despairs of ever doing anything at all. He cannot live without this faith in his mission, and the overpowering desire for it finally drives him to a monstrous act. When Rebecca tries to reassure him by pointing out that if he had not succeeded in

¹³The Theatrical 'World' of 1897, p. 143.

ennobling her, she would not have confessed her sin, he is still not satisfied. He asks her to give him the supreme proof—to sacrifice her own share in his future by following in the path of Mrs. Rosmer. She consents. But it is still not enough, for he is now being goaded by another ideal—the superstition of expiation by sacrifice—to which he at last commends both their lives. Rebecca has the higher light, says Shaw. She goes to her death, not in any guilty fear, but out of fellowship with the man she loves, who can be "redeemed" in no other way. Thus, he interprets her line, "I am under the power of the Rosmersholm view of life now. What I have sinned it is fit I should expiate," as a final protest against that view, a declaration that she has realized its futility. No one can say whether Ibsen himself intended these words to be so understood; certainly such an interpretation is by no means obvious. And yet it is one of which Shaw may well be proud. Without being demonstrably false to Ibsen, he has read into this appalling tragedy a sign of hope that relieves its dismal blackness, and he has presented a view of the play as a whole which renders vividly clear its merits as a study in the antithetical development of two fascinating characters.

The Lady From the Sea is diagnosed as an analysis of the origin of ideals in dissatisfaction with the real—Shaw's imposing way of saying that a toy wife is likely to get into mischief. This discussion is disappointing, not so much because of its thesis, but because of Shaw's puerile attempt to defend it from hostile criticism and his refusal to admit that, considered either as a social document or a pure work of art, The Lady From the Sea is one of Ibsen's weakest plays. He admits that it is "the most poetic fancy

imaginable," but dismisses criticism of the character of Ellida as ungrounded:

It should be noted here that Ellida, the Lady from the Sea, seems more fantastic to English readers than to Norwegian ones. The same thing is true of many other characters drawn by Ibsen, notably Peer Gynt, who, if born in England, would certainly not have been a poet and metaphysician as well as blackguard and speculator. The extreme type of Norwegian, as depicted by Ibsen, imagines himself doing wonderful things but does nothing.¹⁴

In the first place this is by no means a purely Norwegian trait, and in the second it does not explain Ellida. It is not, as Shaw very well knew, a question of whether English women are like her, but of whether any women are like her. The whole thing is a striking illustration of Shaw's Ibsen-can-do-no-wrong attitude.

One of A. B. Walkley's favorite queries, "What is the moral of Hedda Gabler?" is left unanswered in Shaw's splendid exposition of that play, for it is more than he can do to fit it into any preconceived design. He tells us that this enigmatic lady falls into an abyss "between the ideals which do not impose on her and the realities she has not yet discovered," and then proceeds to give a lucid analysis of the code she does live by. The whole interpretation emphasizes an important note of Shavian morality—the idea that what is a virtuous act for one person may be a sin for another, depending upon the intention of the doer. Thus he does not contend that Hedda's conduct was intrinsically evil, but that her failure to repudiate the conventional standards which she had already violated made it evil. When Lovborg, after their reunion, taunts her with being a coward,

¹⁴"The Quintessence of Ibsenism," p. 91.

She admits that the virtuous heroics with the pistol were pure cowardice; but she is still so void of any other standard of conduct that she thinks her cowardice consisted in not daring to be wicked. That is, she thinks that what she actually did was the right thing; and since she despises herself for doing it, and feels that he also rightly despises her for doing it, she gets a passionate feeling that what is wanted is the courage to do wrong. This unlooked for reaction of idealism, this monstrous but very common setting-up of wrongdoing as an ideal, and of the wrongdoer as hero or heroine qua wrongdoer, leads Hedda to conceive that when Lovborg tried to seduce her he was a hero, and that in allowing Thea to reform him he has played the recreant. In acting on this misconception she is restrained by no consideration for any of the rest.¹⁵

This explanation of Hedda's perversion is sufficient to clarify the play, but there is no reason to believe that Ibsen would have accepted, any more than we can accept, Shaw's inference that this same conduct on the part of a "realist" would cease to be immoral. Our interest in Hedda Gabler is not so much in what she did, the heinousness of which there can be no question, but in how she could bring herself to do it, and it is this which Shaw helps to make clear. Unfortunately the discussion is marred somewhat by Shaw's peculiar insistence that Hedda, the most highly individualized character in Ibsen's realistic drama, is "a typical nineteenth century figure"—a suburban lady whom a friend of his takes in to dinner twice a week.

The plays of Ibsen's final period, which appeared after the first publication of "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" in 1891, must have convinced even the most rabid Shavian that this artful and bold attempt to make Ibsen a Fabian of the Shaw variety was far from successful. With the possible exception of the difficult Master Builder, they cannot be interpreted on the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

basis of any "idealist" theory, no matter how subtle, unless one cares to contend that each of the passions studied in them—jealousy, greed, egotism—is exactly what Shaw had always meant by an ideal, in which case he was guilty of a tremendous waste of words. Shaw does refer to them as ideals, half-heartedly and as a measure of self-defense, perhaps, but the whole tone of his discussion of these last plays is subdued and relatively undogmatic, and his thesis receives but slight emphasis. From his discussion of Little Eyolf alone, we can see that the difficulties he encountered were insuperable. Why, for instance, if Ibsen were a Shavian, did he make the advanced and intelligent Asta follow the conventional, "idealistic" course of renunciation when she discovered that she was not Allmers' half-sister, instead of allowing her to confess the whole thing in an attempt to win him from a wife whom he did not love? A possible answer is that Ibsen was more of a conventionalist than Shaw would care to admit, and so Asta is dismissed in considerable haste. But Shaw cannot ignore the solution of the major problem, and it is this which clearly defeats his thesis, in spite of a last valiant but futile effort to turn it to his own ends. When Rita and Allmers are left together at the final curtain, tragic as their marriage has so far been, we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that if Ibsen is preaching any formal doctrine, it is not Bernard Shaw's. Rita and Allmers do not go out with Nora to stand alone until they are prepared for an honorable companionship, although as individuals they have far better reasons for doing so than the heroine of A Doll's House. Instead they are sacrificed to something very like the old idealist's convention—reparation through service to society, which involves,

of course, the sublimation of their individual personalities. Shaw admits that at first glance this is all very surprising and not at all what we would expect. And yet, he thinks, it is not really inconsistent, for Ibsen is here insisting explicitly and for the first time that "we are members one of another" and that "though the strongest man is he who stands alone, the man who is standing alone for his own sake solely is literally an idiot."¹⁶ But this will not do. The Shavian doctrine, as outlined in the early chapters of the work on Ibsen, insists that this "standing alone" for the purpose of reforming one's own self must take precedence over all other obligations. This is the justification of Nora's revolt. To insist that if Rita and Allmers were to follow the same course they would be standing alone for their own sakes solely (which Ibsen here did) is to contradict this cardinal doctrine, and Shaw cannot explain it away. He concludes, somewhat lamely: "When a man is at last brought face to face with himself by a brave Individualism, he finds himself face to face, not with an individual, but with a species, and knows that to save himself, he must save the race."¹⁷ Admirable as this sentiment may be, it is the expression of a man who is trying to hide his own defeat in a platitude. In what did this "brave Individualism" of the Allmers consist? In a sacrifice which is the antithesis of Nora's action and which is irrefutable proof that Ibsen is preaching no set doctrine. In the words of Edmund Wilson:

There is, of course, a social revolutionist, a man of 1848, in Wagner, and a critic of bourgeois institutions in Ibsen. But Bernard Shaw, in his brilliant little books, by emphasizing these aspects of their work at the

¹⁶Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 110.

expense of everything else, seriously misrepresents them...In Ibsen's case Shaw is particularly misleading, because Ibsen disclaimed again and again any social-reforming intentions. His great theme, characteristic though it is of nineteenth century society, is not a doctrine of social salvation: it is the conflict between one's duty to society as a unit in the social organism and the individual's duty to himself. Ibsen treats this theme over and over but in a number of different ways, sometimes emphasizing the validity of social claims as opposed to the will of the individual ("Little Eyolf"), sometimes showing them as unjustified and oppressive ("Ghosts"), sometimes showing the individual undone by self-indulgence or perverse self-assertion ("Brand" and "Peer Gynt")...But the conflict is always serious; and it usually ends in disaster. Rarely—"A Doll's House" is the principal example—does it result in a liberation. Ibsen is hardly even a social philosopher: he stops with the conflict itself.¹⁸

Yet "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" is still a valuable work, and Shaw remains a brilliant interpreter of Ibsen. We may rightly dismiss the philosophy which he attempts to draw from the plays as a thing of his own making, but there is no denying the cleverness of the attempt, or, in many cases, its remarkable cogency. This is because Shaw is nowhere closer to Ibsen, I think, than in his analysis of the playwright's attitude toward morality. If the plays prove anything at all about the student of marriage and domestic society who was their maker, it is that he had no moral code in the commonly accepted sense of that term—that his attitude was that of an experimenter who, as Shaw puts it, viewed each case as a thing by itself. Thus it is that Nora Helmer and Rita Allmers, though faced with a similar problem, do not find a common solution for their domestic crises. Each goes her own way, Ibsen saying nothing as to the relative merits of their choices. If Shaw had

¹⁸ "Bernard Shaw at Eighty," The Triple Thinkers, pp. 248-29.

been content to prove that the quintessence of Ibsenism is that there is no formula, there could be little quarrel with his thesis. In trying to do more he failed. Nevertheless, his failure to make Ibsen a Shavian should not blind us to the merits of what he did achieve—the creation of an atmosphere favorable to the reception of Ibsen's works, and an analysis of his plays which, in spite of its defects, cannot fail to bring the reader closer to the spirit of their author. "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" must itself be distilled; but the distillate is pure gold.

2. Pinero

If there had been, up to this time, any doubt that Shaw was imbued with the virtue known as "the courage of one's convictions," it was speedily dispelled in 1895 by the appearance of two essays on the plays of Arthur Wing Pinero—the earliest in a series of reviews which during the next three years were to bring down upon Shaw's head the wrath of every prominent critic in London, and which, his discussions of Shakespeare alone excepted, made him the symbol in the popular mind of the very worst kind of critical iconoclasm. For a number of years, and especially since 1893, Pinero had been everywhere acknowledged as England's foremost dramatist, and by 1895 he had become a kind of national idol. At the box-office, his success was as unflinching as his treatment at the hands of the critics—by whom, led by Archer, he was accepted as the inaugurator of the modern dramatic movement in the British Isles. "The English Ibsen" he was called, and this, more than anything else, infuriated Shaw, to whom Pinero represented the old school in its most

sophisticated and highly polished—and therefore most dangerous—form. Believing that nothing was more likely to forestall the advent of a mature and intelligent English theatre than the imitation by young, untutored playwrights of the drama of compromise which Pinero had effected, he threw caution to the winds and vigorously attacked his works at every opportunity. As was his custom in dealing with an opponent, Shaw exaggerated Pinero's defects, in a few instances quite unjustifiably. Nevertheless, Time, that most unerring of arbiters, has proved that the basis of his attack was sound, and the reader of today, beset no longer by the prejudices of this pioneering age, may recognize in these unflinching articles of Shaw his most pointed and discerning criticism.

Although the first and historic production of The Second Mrs. Tanqueray antedated by almost two years the assumption of his post as drama critic, Shaw refused to leave the play untouched. He made its publication in February, 1895, serve as the occasion for his first and most famous denunciation of Pinero, drawing on his remarkable memory for details of staging.¹⁹ The immense popular success of the play he could not accept as evidence of its merit, which was "relative to the culture of the playgoing public," and this was at a very low ebb indeed. (During all these years Shaw clung to the belief that intelligent people rarely went to the theatre, since it had nothing to offer them. In this consoling doctrine he was probably correct, though it was undoubtedly shaken somewhat when Londoners began to flock to productions of his own plays.) Granted that Paula Tanqueray is an astonishingly well-

¹⁹Cf. "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, pp. 47-50.

drawn figure "as stage figures go nowadays," he argued, "there is no cheaper subject for the character draughtsman than the ill-tempered sensual woman seen from the point of view of the conventional man." And Pinero is the conventional man par excellence, "who in literature is a humble and somewhat belated follower of the novelists of the middle of the nineteenth century, and who has never written a line from which it could be guessed that he is a contemporary of Ibsen, Tolstoi, Meredith, or Sarah Grand," who now finds himself "at the dawn of the twentieth hailed as a man of new ideas, of daring originality, of supreme literary distinction, and even—which is perhaps oddest—of consummate stage craft." Now as a matter of fact Pinero did eventually become an expert technician: if the student of his plays can never quite lose consciousness of their mechanism, the average theatre-goer is rarely bothered by it. But Shaw was right, as far as The Second Mrs. Tanqueray is concerned. He is quick to point out the wasteful and obvious exposition of the first act, the utter absurdity of requiring the hero to leave his own dinner party in order to write some letters, so that something might be said behind his back, the transparency of Cayley Drummle as confidant, the mechanics of the doors, the postman, and the French windows, and especially the gigantic coincidence on which the plot depends. What most of the critics apparently mean by stagecraft, he concludes, is "recklessness in the substitution of dead machinery and lay figures for vital action and real characters." Pinero may be ingenious, but his ingenuity is like that of a painter who is compelled to work with his mouth—and this is "an extremity to be deplored, not an art to be admired."

Had Shaw let his condemnation rest on this obvious mechanical aspect of the piece, he would have left us a sensible and relatively objective criticism of a play which swept most of his contemporaries off their feet and made them believe they were witnessing drama of an extremely high order. But he was overly ambitious. He knew that Pinero had a passable gift for making his people seem living figures, just as he also knew that the playwright lacked the power to illuminate the deeper recesses of character. This latter conviction, coupled with (in this case) a somewhat obtuse anti-conventionalism, led him to contend that Pinero completely betrayed this lack of insight in the most telling situation in the play—the scene in which Paula is compelled to reply to Tanqueray's "fatuous but not unnatural" speech beginning, "I know what you were at Ellean's age. You hadn't a thought that wasn't a wholesome one, etc." Shaw held that on Paula's reply depended Pinero's status as a serious dramatist, since this was one moment when the gift of "an eye for character" had to be supplemented by the dramatic gift of "sympathy with character"—the ability to see things from her point of view. On her reply in "a play by a master hand," he argues, Tanqueray would have seen that "a woman of that sort is already the same at three as she is at thirty-three"—and even though she did realize that her nature was in conflict with differently constituted people's ideals, she would have remained "perfectly valid" to herself—"despising herself if at all only for the hypocrisy that the world forces on her." (Yes, Archer agreed, "in a play by one master hand.") Instead Pinero makes her take the "Tanqueray-Ellean-Pinero point of view": "Oh God! A few years ago!" and the rest. So that Paula is revealed

as a work of prejudiced observation instead of comprehension—"a projection of Mr. Pinero's own personal amiabilities, beliefs, and conventions," and the dramatist himself as "no interpreter of character, but simply an adroit describer of people as the ordinary man sees and judges them." All this is the sheerest nonsense, and it is no wonder that Archer raged against it, pointing it out as proof of his contention that Shaw as critic was a destructive force in the theatre. Here is is G.B.S. who is being narrow, arbitrarily refusing to believe that Paula might honestly have regretted her past and, even worse, contending that her type is incapable of change. The absurdity of the argument, with its unfailing audacity, gave this review its original fame or, better, notoriety. Unfortunate though it be and unworthy of its author, we should not allow ourselves to forget that Shaw first exposed the weakness of the play on grounds which admit of little or no argument, and that to his earlier objections neither Archer nor anyone else has made a satisfactory reply.

One month later Shaw renewed the attack on Pinero, but to appreciate his review of The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith the reader need make no reservations.²⁰ It is, I think, his finest single contribution to the Saturday Review, rationally and cleverly dissecting the play, and leaving its skeleton so completely bare that even William Archer could not reclothe it. Putting the story of the socialist agitator and her great love in the same class as its famous predecessor, Shaw saw it as an attempt to conquer the public "by the exquisite flattery of giving them plays that they really liked, whilst per-

²⁰Cf. "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, pp. 63-69.

suading them that such appreciation was only possible from persons of great culture and intellectual acuteness." This was the old trick by which Pinero gained the effect of being immensely in the modern movement"—the taking of the ordinary article and "giving it an air of novel, profound, and original thought." The best that could be said for the man was that as a thinker and social philosopher he was a character actor ("one who cannot act but who knows the disguises by which acting can be grotesquely simulated") in the domain of authorship. When the play is good, "the effect of philosophy will pass off on those who are no better philosophers than he," but when it is bad, as here, the sham of the whole business sticks out horribly. This little preface to the review itself deserves to be remembered, for nowhere does Shaw make clearer his reasons for objecting to England's most respected playwright.

The only thing that gave Mrs. Ebbsmith any reality at all, according to G.B.S., was the acting of Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who tried her best to drive Pinero off the stage. Agnes Ebbsmith, as the author portrays her, is the active and radical daughter, educated from childhood for her role. She is naturally in the habit of speaking in public; but when Pinero writes of the iron building in St. Luke's, the plinth in the Nelson column, and the "pitch" in the park, he does so with "the exquisitely suburban sense" of their being the dark places of the earth, in spite of the fact that they enter nowadays "very largely into the political education of almost all publicly active men and women." Worse than this, he makes the even greater mistake of thinking that the woman who speaks in public and has wider interests than those of her

own household "is a special variety of the human species and that there is something dramatic in discovering that she has the common passions of humanity." After setting her up as a kind of symbol, Pinero allows her to degrade herself by completely forgetting the ideas which thus far have motivated her conduct (when she finds that the nursing patient with whom she has fallen in love doesn't care a rap about them) and utterly abandoning herself to his passion as "the only hour in a woman's life." Later a clergyman offers her a Bible. She pitches it into the stove—and then retrieves it: the Christian Church is saved. "A less sensible and courageous effect I have never witnessed." If Pinero had drawn a picture of a woman oppressed by fanatic religious teachings in childhood, he might have given some of the public "a wholesome lesson by making the woman thrust the Bible into the stove and leave it there." But to give us a woman carefully educated as a secularist, whose one misfortune—an unhappy marriage—"can hardly by any stretch of casuistry be laid to the charge of St. Paul's teaching"—to make her senselessly say that all her troubles are due to the Bible—to make her throw it into the stove and then injure herself horribly in pulling it out again—"this, I submit, is a piece of claptrap so gross that it absolves me from all obligation to treat Mr. Pinero's art as anything higher than the barest art of theatrical sensation. As in *The Profligate*, as in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, he has no idea beyond that of doing something daring and bringing down the house by running away from the consequences."

Whether or not this brilliant criticism, here highly condensed, was in the nature of a defense of Mrs. Besant, who was thought to be the original of

Agnes Ebbsmith, whether or not it has what Shaw calls the "inevitable" fault of extreme unfairness, since "my school is in violent reaction against that of Mr. Pinero," the fact remains that it is almost wholly unanswerable, the exposition of the ridiculous inconsistencies in the character of Agnes being more than enough to damn the play as the claptrap that Shaw called it.

Archer's terming it "a very true, very subtle, and very tragic play" which none but a master dramatist could have written becomes all the more inexplicable in the light of his own admission that the last part of it should be changed. His refusal to recognize that this was one case in which Shaw had the upper hand is childish; his attempts to defend the play are very weak.²¹ The only possible explanation is that Pinero was the great blind spot of a critic ordinarily noted for the clearness of his vision. Archer's even stronger dictum, years later, that Mid-Channel was a play above criticism, goes far to establish the justice of this view.

That Shaw was not irrationally prejudiced against Pinero (he was, after all, a leader in the movement to procure him a knighthood for his services to the theatre), that he had a sound appreciation of his real talent, is clear enough from his review in the following season of The Benefit of the Doubt, Pinero's next long play.²² This interesting story of a liaison between a frivolous wife and a tormented husband, with all the resultant domestic complications, Shaw considered the author's best serious play thus far. "This time Mr. Pinero has succeeded. The Benefit of the Doubt is worth The Profligate, Mrs. Tanqueray, and Mrs. Ebbsmith rolled into one and multi-

²¹For Archer's discussion, cf. The Theatrical 'World' of 1895, pp. 75-94.

²²Cf. "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, pp. 228-235.

plied by ten...Mr. Pinero, concentrating himself on a phase of life and sentiment which he thoroughly understands, has extracted abundant drama from it, and maintained it at an astonishingly high and even pressure for two hours, without for a moment being driven back on the woman with a past, the cynical libertine peer, the angel of purity, the Cayley Drummle confidant, or any other of the conventional figures which inevitably appear in his plays whenever he conceives himself to be dealing as a sociologist with public questions of which he has no solid knowledge, but only a purely conventional and theatrical conceit." The play is closely-knit, freely moving, and natural simply because Pinero has confined himself to the strata and the problems of the society which he best understands—the Bayswater-Kensington genre, "of which he is a master." In handling every complication of a somewhat tangled plot, "Mr. Pinero is never at a loss. He knows what pretty daughters and frivolous mothers are like in those circles which used to be called demi-mondaine before that distinction was audaciously annexed by people who are not mondaine at all; he knows what the divorce court and the newspapers mean to them; he knows what a jealous woman is like; and he has dramatized them all with an intensity never attained by him before. Consciously or unconsciously he has this time seen his world as it really is: that is, a world which never dreams of bothering its little head with large questions or general ideas." All this may be something of a left-handed compliment, but I have never seen a clearer definition of Pinero's real sphere of influence, the widespread acceptance of which in our own age must be a great recompense to Shaw for the abuse which it brought him in his own.

The same review has a secondary interest in that it offers a splendid and quotable example of Shaw's approach to the problems of acting, of which he was in general an extremely severe critic. Barbed and witty he was, but rarely for the sake of the laughter alone. Delightfully cogent are his reasons for castigating Leonard Boyne's John Allingham:

We all know the melodramatic style which grew up in the days when actors who played 'emotional' parts habitually got themselves into the requisite maudlin condition by making themselves half drunk. This was the true origin of the detestable veiled voice and muzzy utterance which no longer produce any illusions except that of the odor of spirits. The actor of the past did not walk across the stage to open the door: he plunged headlong at the handle and, when he had safely grasped it, rolled his eye round to give some pretence of dramatic significance to an action which really expressed nothing but his doubts as to his ability to walk straight. He hung over the furniture, leant against the staircase, wallowed, collapsed tragically when he sat down, did everything, in short, to conceal his condition and cover up the absence of that clear, sober, elegant speech and movement which mark the self-possessed and accomplished artist. The old drunken habits have nearly passed away—at least, I hope future generations of critics will not often have to write sympathetic obituary notices deploring the 'breakdown in health' of actors and actresses who notoriously drank themselves first off the stage and then out of the world—but the style of acting that arose in the days when everybody drank remains with us as a senseless superstition, and is still laboriously acquired and cultivated by perfectly sober actors.

Even yet it has not entirely disappeared—either in its cultivated or genuine form—and it is only a matter of time until the critics find themselves compelled to write another such sympathetic obituary on a once great actor of our own day. Limitation of space prevents the quotation of a passage almost as memorable—Shaw's hilarious description of the young lady (a type universal) who expresses emotion "by catching the left side of her under lip be-

tween her front teeth, and twisting the right corner as much out of its natural place as possible." To analyses so gay and so keen the victims themselves must have found it difficult to object.

After modestly taking credit for Pinero's improvement between The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith and The Benefit of the Doubt²³ (there being no improvement between Mrs. Tanqueray and Mrs. Ebbsmith, in which period he had not yet assumed his role of critic!) Shaw returned to the attack in discussing The Princess and the Butterfly, but for largely non-dramatic reasons, however, which had best be considered in connection with his review of Jones' The Physician. At Trelawny of the Wells he bade a professional goodbye to Pinero, allowing himself to be completely charmed by the nostalgia of the piece, "which has touched me more than anything else Mr. Pinero has ever written," and re-phrasing his original indictment of that most diligent of playwrights in worthier and more gracious terms. In the glow of this lovely tribute to the age of Robertson he wrote: "I cannot pretend to think that Mr. Pinero, in returning to that period, has really had to turn back the clock as far as his own sympathies and ideals are concerned. It seems to me that the world is to him still the world of Johnny Eames and Lily Dale, Vincent Crummies and Newman Noggs: his Paula Tanquerays and Mrs. Ebbsmiths appearing as pure aberrations whose external differences he is able to observe as far as they can be observed, but whose point of view he has never found."²⁴

²³Cf. "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 24, pp. 57-60, for Shaw's delightful comments on Pinero's preface to The Theatrical 'World' of 1895.

²⁴Ibid., vol. 25, p. 325.

3. Jones

It is not surprising that in Henry Arthur Jones, whose name history has coupled with that of Pinero, Shaw recognized the foremost playwright of these years of indecision. Both Jones and Shaw were in violent reaction against the conventionalities of the Victorian Age, and each realized that the theatre, more than any other art, was in a position to influence the habits of society. At the same time Jones was by no means an out-and-out propagandist. A disciple of Matthew Arnold and a man of boundless ambition, he had been laboring since the eighties to restore "high seriousness" to the theatre by giving it plays in which (so he thought) emphasis was placed on character and thought rather than on plot alone. Shaw's discussions of his later works are interesting not only because they pay tribute to this laudable purpose, but also because, in recognizing the affinity (ideal rather than real—Jones was no lover of Shaw, whom he considered too radical) between playwright and critic, they provoke that typically Shavian response which through the years has won for G.B.S. both praise and contempt—the habit of giving pontifical directions for the re-writing of plays with which he sympathized but could not wholly agree. Here again Shaw and Archer were on opposite sides of the fence, although the latter was very much less anti-Jones than Shaw was anti-Pinero.

Shaw begins his review of The Triumph of the Philistines with the surprisingly un-Shavian statement that the play offers "material for the social essayist rather than the dramatic critic, being avowedly an object-lesson in

British lower middle-class hypocrisy."²⁵ He must have been referring to the usual dramatic critic, for the distinction here implied between social problems and the function of the theatre was anathema to him. Praising the attack on prudery which motivates this story of the life of Market Pewbury and its disruption by an "immoral" artist, he returns to normalcy by calling it sharp, courageous, and uncompromising, and consoling the author for its none too friendly critical reception by the expression of one of his strongest convictions: "Every play which is a criticism of contemporary life must, if it is an honest play, involve a certain struggle with the public. Accordingly, Mr. Jones was not so unanimously applauded when the curtain fell on poor Mr. Jorgan's very mixed 'triumph' as Mr. Pinero was after Mrs. Ebbsmith pulled the Bible out of the fire. But his courage was respected; and there, I think, he had the advantage of Mr. Pinero." More positively, Jones' qualities were "creative imagination, curious observation, inventive humor, originality, sympathy, and sincerity." However, these have their drawbacks. "It is safer and cheaper to depend on the taste, judgment, instinct for fashion and knowledge of the stage and public, by which plays can be constructed out of ready-made materials, and guaranteed to pass an evening safely and smoothly, instead of, like the real live work of Mr. Jones, rousing all sorts of protests and jarring all sorts of prejudices, besides disgusting the professorial critics and amateurs by its impenitent informality," this latter quality being partly the result of Jones' habit of exaggerating his characters in Dickensian fashion.

²⁵Ibid., vol. 23, pp. 129-33.

Nevertheless, Shaw does not hesitate to make it clear that he is far from considering The Triumph of the Philistines a great play. His objections to it rest on its confusion of Puritanism and Philistinism, on which subjects, as we have seen, he had very definite ideas, and the true nature of which, he felt, Jones did not understand. The author knew his Market Pewbury well enough to joke with it, but not his art. Jorgan, the opponent of the painter, Willie Hesslewood, is called a Philistine, whereas he is really a Puritan—"a fanatical idealist to whom all stimulations of the sense of beauty are abhorrent, because they touch only his sex instinct which he regards as his greatest weakness." It is Sir Valentine Fellowes who is the real Philistine, even though he opposes the rest by defending the artist. When Jorgan denounces Hesslewood as a pandar to sensualism, Sir Valentine, instead of denying it, as anyone with real standards would have, simply says in effect, "Why not? Everyone should be allowed to sow a few wild oats once in a while." Jones' instinct of character was right in making him take that line, but how can the audience sympathize with it? Surely Jorgan's attitude is the more respectable. "After all, if art were simply a matter of Bacchante pictures of rapscaillionly little models, then surely we should agree with Mr. Skewitt's 'Burn it, I say. Burn it; and have done with the iniquity.' Jones was so busy ferreting out the hypocrisy and narrowness of Market Pewbury that he did not work up his case as thoroughly as he might, and we feel that this plan, with its substitution of a picture for a question of conduct, is not quite right. Market Pewbury is left, after all, with the best of the argument." It would be foolish to deny the healthy soundness of Shaw's ob-

jection. In his general view that the goodness of the play lay in its intention rather than in its execution, Archer concurred. Although he objected to its satire as "ugly, shallow, and bitter," to its construction as "loose" and "poor," and to the scandal aroused by Sir Valentine's action as, for an English rather than a Norwegian village, wildly fantastic, he closed his review in a more complimentary fashion: "A good play it certainly is not; by strict rules it might even be set down as a singularly bad play. All the more clearly does it prove that even the British public has reached the point of preferring a bad play which means something, to an adroit play which means nothing. Therefore I welcome it."²⁶ Well, then, Shaw might have asked, where does that leave Pinero?

Typically Shavian is the review of Michael and His Lost Angel.²⁷ Beginning in the enthusiastic vein, it pays tribute to the organic character of Jones' plays, which actually grow and do not rely on the simple "feats of carpentry" by which Grundy and Sardou stick their pieces together. This particular work is called "a genuinely sincere and moving play, feelingly imagined, written with knowledge as to the man and insight as to the woman by an author equipped not only with the experience of an adept playwright... but with that knowledge of spiritual history in which Mr. Jones's nearest competitors seem so stupendously deficient. Its art is in vital contact with the most passionate religious movement of its century, as fully quickened art always has been." Comparing it in these respects with the work of Grundy and Pinero, "...I unhesitatingly class Mr. Jones as first, and eminently first,

²⁶The Theatrical 'World' of 1895, p. 160.

²⁷Cf. "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 24, pp. 15-22.

among the surviving fittest of his own generation of playwrights." But then come the reservations. Pouncing on a single word and cleverly interpreting its implications in the light of his own creed, Shaw denies the play "full tragic honors." Jones' biggest mistake, according to G.B.S., occurred at the beginning of the third act. When Audrie Lesden asks Michael, the minister with whom she had had an affair, if he is sorry, he replies in the negative, whereas if his professional code were really valid to him, he would have been aching with remorse and could not possibly have replied as he did. At any rate, it is clear that he is not sorry. Then why the hair shirt, the public penance, etc.? Whether the hero is right or wrong in his views is of no immediate consequence, says Shaw; the important thing is that to be a hero he must follow "his own star," and this he does not do. "Let me rewrite the last three acts, and you shall have your Reverend Michael embracing the answer of his own soul, thundering it from the steps of his altar, and marching out through his shocked and shamed parishioners, with colors flying and head erect and unashamed, to the freedom of faith in his own real conscience." Failing to direct the play in this course, Jones could still have given us a real tragedy by making the last acts deal with Michael's failure in self-realization. Instead he shares Michael's fatalism, "accepting his remorse, confession, and disgrace as inevitable, with a monastery for the man and death for the woman as the only possible stage ending—surely not so much an ending as a slopping up of the remains of the two poor creatures."

Here again Shaw's logic is excellent, but this time his premise is faulty. Michael's "No" is an answer of the moment—sincere enough, no doubt,

but certainly not intended as a repudiation of his whole moral code. The full weight of his remorse, with its consequent acts of repentance, comes on him gradually as his intensely spiritual character (to which Shaw does not give sufficient consideration) begins to re-assert itself. In other words, his remorse and confession are inevitable: Michael is not a Shavian. Archer, who thought that in this play "Jones has enriched, not our theatre only, but our literature, with a beautiful love story," comes closer, I think, to its real flaw.²⁸ Since Audrie regards the ascetic ideal lightly, why, he asks, does she not attempt to drag Michael out of what she considers "a prison-house of superstition"? Even if she could not succeed, her character demands that she try. Instead she remains passive, paralyzed. As the play stands, Archer's objection seems to have the greater validity—unless, of course, Jones really intended Michael's denial as a seriously considered statement of fact, in which case Shaw is perfectly right. Both Shaw and Archer, to their credit, make short work of the ridiculous objections to the scenic representation of the interior of a church—objections which unfortunately still persist in kind in that island of inverted piety.

Since The Rogue's Comedy, Jones' next play and a melodramatic farce, was unanimously dismissed as pleasant but trivial, there is little point in discussing it. However, its successor, The Physician, which appeared in March, 1897, aroused a Shavian response that demands attention. Pinero's Princess and the Butterfly was produced in the same month, and Shaw yoked them together and condemned them both for reasons which have little or nothing to do

²⁸Cf. The Theatrical 'World' of 1896, pp. 16-25.

with the drama.²⁹ The heroes of both plays are men of middle age; they discuss the fact and regret the passing of their youth—for most people a common enough practice. Not so for Shaw. Away with this 'life is not worth living,' vanitas vanitatum, Shakespeare vein, he cries. Look at these two deluded men. Jones, born in 1851, seems to take fifty years as the peak of life; Pinero, 1855, forty. "Well my opinion is that sixty is the prime of life for a man. Cheer up, Mr. Pinero: courage, Henry Arthur! 'What though the grey do something mingle with our younger brown' (excuse my quoting Shakespeare), the world is as young as ever. Go look at the people in Oxford Street: they are always the same age." But The Princess and the Butterfly, which has time for its real subject, called forth much more than this magnificently robust optimism—which was by no means starry-eyed. Pinero's mating of a man of forty-five with a girl of eighteen, and of a woman of forty-one with a youth of twenty-eight, Shaw considered foolish and essentially dishonest. He felt that Pinero's sense of humor would compel him to give the verdict against himself. "But no: he gravely decided that the heart that loves never ages; and now perhaps he will write us another drama, limited strictly to three acts, with, as heroine, the meteoric girl at forty with her husband at sixty-seven, and, as hero, the fiery youth at forty-nine with his wife at sixty-two." To lament the passing of time, Shaw felt, was foolish and wasteful; but to deny it was ridiculous. Surely it is not mere source-hunting that leads one to recognize in this discussion the germ of the idea that was soon to develop into one of Shaw's finest plays, Candida, the heroine of

²⁹Cf. "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 25, pp. 94-102.

which rejects her youthful suitor in words very similar to those here quoted.

This preoccupation with the problems of age and time, together with the fact that the play was so close to serious drama and yet lacked a definite "philosophy," blinded Shaw to the merits of The Physician, an unimportant but very fascinating Jonesian drama. However, he did at least recognize the wonderful quality of its exposition, to which Archer pays such great tribute in The Old Drama and The New, and which helps to establish the justice of Shaw's claim that Jones was the more worthy artist—the equal (perhaps) of Pinero in stagecraft and definitely his superior in the intellectual and emotional content of his works. Shaw usually exaggerates Jones' technical ability and minimizes Pinero's, but he is certainly right in his comparison of The Physician and The Princess and the Butterfly: "...It is no exaggeration to say that within two minutes from the rising of the curtain Mr. Jones has got tighter hold of his audience and further on with his play than Mr. Pinero within two hours."

The Liars was the last of Jones' plays to pass under Shaw's critical ken, and, as with the first, the response is entirely conditioned by Shavianism.³⁰ Archer was content to pass off this conventional story of a love affair between a gallant and a married woman to whom it is a passing thing, the whole business being hushed up when all are brought to their senses, as "bright and interesting" but definitely inconsequential, which, of course, it is. Shaw, however, found abundant compensation for its triviality in its accurate picture of smart society—"merciless and from the outside, as are

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 221-24.

Dickens' pictures." This is a favorite (and by no means untenable) idea of Shaw's. Thackeray can please society, he says, because though he satirized it, he did so from the point of view of one who actually regarded it as the center of the world, whatever its faults. Dickens did not so regard it, and neither does Jones, and theirs is the advantage; for whereas the outsider can appreciate the insider, the reverse can never be true. "From Dickens' point of view Thackeray and Trollope are fully available, whilst from their point of view Dickens is deplorable. Just so with Mr. Jones and Mr. Pinero. Mr. Jones' pictures of society never seem truthful to those who see ladies and gentlemen as they see themselves. They are restricted to Mr. Pinero's plays, recognizing in them alone poetic justice to the charm of good society. But those who appreciate Mr. Jones accommodate themselves without difficulty to Mr. Pinero's range, and so enjoy both." Jones' "comedic sentiment" of friendly contempt Shaw hailed as "fresh" and "modern," but the conventionality of the play's ending irked him, for he writes scornfully of its "essentially pious theology and its absolute conceptions of duty" as belonging to "a passionately anti-comedic [un-Shavian] conception." In other words, its "observation" is of today, its "idealism" of yesterday.

For all his praise of Jones, however, Shaw knew well that he was not another Ibsen—that he was, in fact, in great danger of slipping into the rut which the commercial success of later and lighter works had paved for him. Shaw's discussion of The Theatrical 'World' of 1897, which may serve as a fitting conclusion to these analyses of Pinero and Jones, surveys dramatic progress in England during the years of his office.³¹ Written in the turbu-

³¹ Ibid., pp. 354-57.

lence of a period which firmly believed it had achieved a new renaissance, it remains as a truly remarkable tribute to the far-sightedness of this most provocative of men. Archer claimed that 1893 and Mrs. Tanqueray had started a new literary movement. He is wrong, says Shaw. The only new movement between Ibsen in 1889 and the present year of 1898 was the entrance of the novelists—and the success of such plays as The Prisoner of Zenda, Trilby, and Under The Red Robe can hardly be considered a forward step. As for the attempts at "greater poetic depth" and "philosophic seriousness," they have been "decisively defeated." Without for a moment forgetting his debt to Jones and Pinero, the student of today knows that this is true. The years between 1895 and 1898 are, on the whole, barren, and Shaw performed a most salutary service in courageously making this clear to the writers of his time. The closest approach of the modern English theatre to a "great period" came after 1898, with the advent of Barker, Galsworthy, Shaw himself, Barrie, and, by a very helpful courtesy, the work of the Irish school. It would be absurd to credit the maturity of the plays of most of these later men, dominated though they are by a goodly share of the excellences that Shaw deemed vital, to the preparatory work of any one critic. But by the same token it would be equally absurd to deny a critic who never failed to make himself heard at least some share in the creation of a theatre in which such works might flourish. In 1897 the most popular English playwrights, according to Archer, were Jones, Pinero, Grundy, Carton, Barrie, Wilde, and, of course, Shakespeare. And what became of them? Grundy and Carton were the hangovers of a bygone epoch, and today they are forgotten. Barrie had only begun; his

real fame was to come later. Oscar Wilde was simply a delightful interlude; we are still awaiting his successor. According to his most friendly critic, Pinero's greatness lay ahead of him. And as for Jones, while we remember him with gratitude and affection for what he did accomplish, we cannot help feeling that he never really fulfilled his promise. As Shaw himself so humbly put it, with more truth than even he suspected: "...surely the worthlessness of this method of calculation must have struck Mr. Archer when he observed—if he did observe—that it placed me at the bottom of the list."

4. Henry James

Shaw's discussion of Guy Domville is an interesting example of his willingness to be as open-minded as possible in the consideration of a work that does not positively conflict with his principles, and it contains a rather pointed analysis of Henry James' world.³² The hooting of the play by an unruly first night audience (of which London, in these days, saw many) together with its very mild reception by most critics annoyed Shaw intensely. The worst that might be said of the piece, according to him, was simply that it is "out of fashion." It is most unfortunate that people who have kept themselves aloof from art and philosophy "and preserved their innocence of the higher life of the senses and of the intellect" can rig up some kind of a play tomorrow which will pass as real drama "with the gentlemen who deny that distinction to the works of Mr. Henry James." It is a good thing, lashed Shaw, that the literary world is not as completely dominated by admirers of

³²Ibid., vol. 23, pp. 6-9.

Mr. Rider Haggard as is the dramatic by their first cousins, or else we should be told that Mr. James cannot write a novel. Then follows what is for Shaw a generous and sensitive tribute to an author wholly unlike himself:

There is no reason why life as we find it in Mr. James's novels—life, that is, in which passion is subordinate to intellect and to fastidious artistic taste—should not be represented on the stage. If it is real to Mr. James, it must be real to others; and why should not these others have their drama instead of being banished from the theatre (to the theatre's great loss) by the monotony and vulgarity of drama in which passion is everything, intellect nothing, and art only brought in by the incidental outrages upon it. As it happens, I am not myself in Mr. James's camp; in all the life that has energy enough to be interesting to me, subjective volition, passion, will, make intellect the merest tool. But there is in the centre of that cyclone a certain calm spot where cultivated ladies and gentlemen live on independent incomes or by pleasant artistic occupations. It is here that Mr. James's art touches life, selecting whatever is graceful, exquisite or dignified in its serenity. It is not life as imagined by the pit or gallery, or even by the stalls: it is, let us say, the ideal of the balcony; but that is no reason why the pit and gallery should excommunicate it on the ground that it has no blood and entrails in it, and have its sentence formulated for it by the fiercely ambitious and wilful professional man in the stalls.

Shaw believed that the whole popular case against the play rested on its violation of the cardinal stage convention that love is the most irresistible of all the passions by sacrificing the hero to what was, after all, a "strong and noble" vocation in the Church. It was left to the cultivated "like myself and all the ablest of my colleagues" to applaud. His analysis, in diagrammatic fashion, lists the qualities of the work as (1) "a rare charm of speech...I unhesitatingly challenge any of our popular dramatists to write a scene in verse with half the beauty of Mr. James's prose," which is beautiful not simply for its verbal fitness but for all its delicate inflections and

cadences; (2) "...a story of fine sentiment and delicate manners, with an entirely worthy and touching ending"; (3) a reliance on the performers, "not for the brute force of their personalities, but for their finest accomplishments in grace of manner, delicacy of diction, and dignity of style." Its only serious defect he found in the second act, which "dissolved the charm rather badly," and in which the dialogue "fell off into mere rococo." Nevertheless, the play was definitely "du théâtre."

By the end of the season Shaw's missionary spirit had returned in force, and in attempting to show that 1895 had not contributed any startling native development to drama, he reconsidered the earlier and perhaps too dangerous excursion which had drawn him momentarily from the straight and narrow path. "The production of Guy Domville," he wrote, "was an attempt to conquer new territory by a coup de main; and that sort of enterprise needs a heavier sort of weapon than Mr. Henry James forges. Then, too, Mr. Henry James's intellectual fastidiousness remains untouched by the resurgent energy and wilfulness of the new spirit. It takes us back to the exhausted atmosphere of George Eliot, Huxley, and Tyndall, instead of thrusting us forward into the invigorating strife raised by Wagner, Ibsen, and Sudermann. That verdant dupe of the lunacy specialists, Dr. Max Nordau, would hardly recognize in Mr. Henry James 'the stigmata of degeneration' which no dramatist at present can afford to be without."³³ This later view, although less gracious, does not really contradict his earlier opinion. Shaw is simply safeguarding his own brand of tolerance from any interpretation which might see in his praise

³³Ibid., pp. 204-05.

of Henry James a relaxation of the fixed principles of his own dramatic creed.

5. Oscar Wilde

William Archer once wrote that as texts for criticism the plays of Oscar Wilde were "barren and delusive...like a mirage-oasis in the desert."³⁴ With Shaw as the critic, this was indeed the case. Wilde has the property of making his critics dull, said Shaw, who never realized that he himself was to be the chief critical victim of this most quixotic of playwrights. After seeing An Ideal Husband, G.B.S. lashed out at the cautious and condescending among his compatriots: "They laugh angrily at his epigrams, like a child who is coaxed into being amused in the very act of setting up a yell of rage and agony. They protest that the trick is obvious, and that such epigrams can be turned out by the score by anyone lightminded enough to condescend to such frivolity. As far as I can ascertain, I am the only person in London who cannot sit down and write an Oscar Wilde play at will."³⁵ As a matter of fact, Shaw goes on, Wilde is "our only thorough playwright." He plays with everything: wit, philosophy, drama, actors, audience,—the whole theatre. He is so colossally lazy that he trifles with the very work by which most artists escape work. But all this does not mean that An Ideal Husband is not a good play. Although lightness of touch may have destroyed its appeal for the paradoxical critics who always protest that the drama should not be didactic, and yet always complaining "if the dramatist does not find sermons in stones and good in everything," it did not prevent Shaw from enjoying the

³⁴The Theatrical 'World' of 1895, p. 57.

³⁵For this review, see "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, pp. 9-12.

Irish Wilde's satire on the "exquisitely comic" seriousness of an Englishman, or, more important, from seeing in the irrepressible Oscar a possible disciple. In Sir Robert Chiltern's assertion of the courage of his wrongdoing against the mechanical idealism of his "stupidly good wife" (who simply asks her husband to stop being a scoundrel) Shaw found what he called the "modern note" in drama, and it is from this, according to him, that most of the best epigrams in the play spring.

Wilde's reply to these flattering overtures of the new Diogenes was not long in coming—one month, to be exact. It was not precisely gracious. The Importance of Being Earnest was its title, and it presented Oscar at his gayest and most unpredictable, brazenly thumbing his nose at all the critics and defying G.B.S. in particular to interpret this piece (as he had misinterpreted the last) according to his own ends, a quite impossible task, as the sorely disillusioned Shaw soon learned. When the play was hailed as something startlingly modern (which, for all its delightful mockery, it certainly is not), Shaw became so enraged that he decided to rip it apart, a task designed more to assuage his own wounded pride than anything else.³⁶ The play is simply an old farcical comedy, he declared, complete with an H. J. Byron punning title; the whole effect is of the seventies, brought up to date as far as possible by Wilde's now-formed style. "I find other critics, equally entitled to respect, declaring that The Importance of Being Earnest is a strained effort of Mr. Wilde's at ultra-modernity, and that it could never have been written but for the opening up of entirely new paths in drama last

³⁶Ibid., pp. 43-46.

year by Arms and the Man. At which I confess to a chuckle." And then comes a new formulation of the same old creed: "I cannot say that I greatly cared for The Importance of Being Earnest. It amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening. I go to the theatre to be moved to laughter, not to be tickled or hustled into it. And that is why, though I laugh as much as anybody at a farcical comedy, I am out of spirits before the end of the second act, and out of temper before the end of the third, my miserable mechanical laughter intensifying these symptoms at every outburst. If the public ever becomes intelligent enough to know when it is really enjoying itself and when it is not, there will be an end of farcical comedy."

It is difficult to read these reviews without feeling that they harm Oscar Wilde not at all, but instead make their author look more than a trifle foolish. And this not because of Shaw's condemnation of The Importance of Being Earnest—in which, as a follower of his own star, he had no choice. We may not agree with it, but at least we can understand it. Shaw's real mistake was in seizing upon an inferior play, praising it on the basis of an interpretation that is nothing short of fantastic, and placing a naive faith in a playwright who was the utter antithesis of himself and all that he stood for. It was Wilde, not Shaw, who had the right to chuckle. After February, 1895, when he had learned his lesson, G.B.S. pursued the much more sensible policy of allowing his disciples to come to him. A few years later they did.

6. Grundy and Sardou: The Old School

We shall let Shaw himself discuss the most popular of the "well-maders,"

Sydney Grundy and Victorien Sardou. It should be quite apparent by this time what he is going to say, so that our chief interest here will lie in his manner of saying it. It was well for these playwrights that Shaw did not represent a metropolitan daily, since for three years he kept hurling at them invectives so choice and so malicious that their general circulation must have inevitably resulted in the conquest of this brand of entertainment by that destructive laughter so dear to their author.

The very first dramatic criticism which Shaw contributed to the Saturday Review was a discussion of Grundy's Slaves of the Ring, a play evidently founded on the love-draught or death-potion scene at the beginning of Tristan und Isolde.³⁷ Whether the playwright got the idea from Bayreuth or whether, as Shaw suggested, such dramatic imaginings are a common heritage, he contrived to make out of it a play "which differs from Wagner's Tristan in this very essential respect, that whereas Tristan is the greatest work of its kind of the century, Slaves of the Ring is not sufficiently typical or classical to deserve being cited even as the worst. It is not a work of art at all: it is a mere contrivance for filling a theatre bill, and not, I am bound to say, a very apt contrivance at that." Necessary for the plot was a married lady who must declare her love for a man other than her husband, believing that he and she are both dead and therefore released from all moral obligations ("this, observe, is the indispensable condition which appears to lie at the back of the popular conception of Paradise in all countries"). Unlike Wagner's Tristan, however, Grundy's so no innocent, but is well aware that he

³⁷Ibid., vol. 23, pp. 1-6.

is quite alive when taking the deluded lady to his bosom. "Hereupon Mr. Grundy owes it to his character as a master of drama that Tristan's wife should overhear these proceedings; and he owes it to his reputation as a master of stage technique that she should announce her presence by turning up a lamp which the other lady has previously had turned down for that express purpose (as every experienced playgoer in the house plainly foresees) on the somewhat emaciated pretext that she prefers to sit in the dark...At all events [of course this may be a reminiscence of Tristan and Isolde's love of night and death] Miss Rorke turns up the lamp with the expertness due to long practice; and then, the dramatic possibilities of the theme being exhausted, the parties get off the stage as best they can."

As for the machinery by which all this is led up to, "I can only say that my utter lack of any sort of relish for Mr. Grundy's school of theatrical art must be my excuse if I fail, without some appearance of malice, adequately to convey my sense of the mathematic lifelessness and intricacy of his preliminaries." At times the whole business was enough to give him "a horrible misgiving that I had at last broken through that 'thin partition' which divides great wits from madness." Shaw admits, however, that there is a kind of "fitful activity" at the end, in the presentation of what he thought Grundy's only apparent social doctrine—that divorce only by the disgrace of one party is a cruel social evil, whence the title of the play, but even this is buried under the "Procrustean framework" of the well-made play.

All of Grundy's works (he represented the business of "constructing showcases for some trumpery little situation") met the same condemnatory

reception, except his adaptation of Dumas père's Mariage sous Louis Quinze and a play called The Greatest of These, produced a year and a half after Shaw's critical blast. The review of this latter is interesting in relation to Grundy because it indicates that he was trying to shake off the old fetters, but even more so in relation to Shaw himself, for it is proof enough, I think, that he did not consciously allow any social message to overrule the concerns of art, and that he was quite aware of the dangers to art in making the discussion play such an important role in the drama.³⁸ This play, he says, "has the advantage of being violently polemical and didactic; and there is nothing the British public loves better in a play, provided, of course, that it is also dramatic. The Greatest of These is dramatic up to the brief but unbearable fourth act, which drops all semblance of drama and is simply and frankly nothing but the chairman's superfluous summing up of the discussion. Ten years ago this play, with its open preaching of the rights of humanity as against virtues, religions, respectabilities, and other manufactured goods—especially the provincial varieties—would have ranked as an insanity only fit for the Independent Theatre. Today, after Ibsen and Nietzsche, the only objection to it is that it is rather too crude, parochial, and old-fashioned an expression of an inspiriting and universal philosophy."

[Italics mine.]

This being the closest thing to a compliment that Grundy ever received from Shaw, it was not unnatural for the playwright to regard him (and the Ibsenites in general) with some disfavor. In an open letter to his even more

³⁸ Ibid., vol. 24, pp. 165-66.

distinguished fellow-sufferer, he wrote: "My dear Pinero, make no mistake. These fawning first-nighters have no following: these fulsome newspapers represent nobody's opinion outside a newspaper office. You are superior to the newspapers. Don't listen to them; but make them listen to you. If need be, fill your ears with wax and bind yourself to the mast; but steer your own course, not theirs."³⁹ Among numerous epithets hurled at Shaw in the same article is Grundy's designation of him as "the crankiest of the stove-pipe fanatics," to which he modestly replied: "Perhaps he means that instead of consuming my own smoke in decent privacy, I fuliginously obscure the clear atmosphere of the 'well-made play' with it. So I do; but what then? A man must live. If I like my own plays, and Ibsen's, and Shakespeare's and Goethe's, and Labiche's and Moliere's better than The Late Mr. Castello and Les Pattes de Mouche, why should I not say so, considering the freedom with which gentlemen of the opposite persuasion offer their opinions?...I would ask Mr. Grundy whether he really finds these well-made 'mechanical rabbit' plays which he champions so very succulent. Does he ever go to see them, for instance, except when he writes them himself? Depend on it, he has not been inside a theatre for ten years, except on his own business. If he had to go as often as I have, he would lose his verdant illusions as to the ravishing superiority of Delia Harding to The Wild Duck or As You Like It."⁴⁰ Let the reader dismiss Shaw's typical coupling of his own plays with those of Shakespeare, Goethe, Ibsen, and the rest, and this reply may stand as still another example of his clear-sightedness. He never hedged in pointing out exactly

³⁹Quoted by Shaw, ibid., p. 59.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 60.

what he thought false in Grundy's work, and he made it quite clear that in his opinion that work was as ephemeral as, say, Hall Caine's, which he had already nipped in the bud. Who today remembers Sydney Grundy? Posterity has committed him to an oblivion more nearly complete, perhaps, than any other writer of equal fame in his own age has ever experienced.

Victorien Sardou took an even worse beating. Two excerpts from Shaw's reviews of Delia Harding and Fedora will be quite sufficient to indicate his approach to the works of that master mechanic of the well-made play. The former he considered "the worst play I ever saw. Taking it as a work bearing the same relation to the tastes of the upper middle class as the Adelphi drama to those of the lower middle class the Adelphi was the great home of melodrama, I declare enthusiastically in favor of the Adelphi. Sardou's plan of playwriting is first to invent the action of his piece, and then to carefully keep it off the stage and have it announced merely by letters and telegrams. The people open the letters and read them whether they are addressed to them or not; and then they talk about what the letter announces as having occurred already or about what they intend to do tomorrow in consequence of receiving them...The whole business was so stale, so obviously factitious, so barrenly inept, that at last the gallery broke out into open derision, almost as if they were listening to a particularly touching and delicate passage in a really good play."⁴¹ As for Fedora, he admits that he should have been prepared for it, what with "Diplomacy Dora" and "Theodora" and "La Toscadora" and the rest. "And yet the thing took me aback. To see

⁴¹Ibid., vol. 23, pp. 102-04.

that curtain go up again and again only to disclose a bewildering profusion of everything that has no business in a play was an experience for which nothing could quite prepare me. The postal arrangements, the telegraphic arrangements, the police arrangements, the names and addresses, the hours and seasons, the tables of consanguinity, the railway and shipping time-tables, the arrivals and departures, the whole welter of Bradshaw and Baedeker, Court Guide and Post Office Directory, whirling around one incredible little stage murder and finally vanishing in a gulp of impossible stage poison, made up an entertainment too Bedlamite for any man with settled wits to pre-conceive."⁴² It is true, of course, that the well-made play was already on the way out when Shaw wrote these things; at the same time, reviews like these must certainly have hastened their exit.

7. Actors and Actresses

The art of the actor, at least, suffered no decline during these lean years. On the contrary, the English stage saw more great actors in the nineties than in any other period of its history, most of whom are remembered today, long after their playwrights have been forgotten. The names of Irving, Duse, Forbes-Robertson, Bernhardt, Ada Rehan, Ellen Terry, Réjane, Janet Achurch, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, to mention the most prominent, still have an almost magical effect on veteran theatregoers, and it is this very effect which suggests to us that the common element in the highly differentiated art of this group was the tremendous and fascinating charm of the individual

⁴²Ibid., pp. 140-44.

personality. This is the quality (now generally called glamour) which makes a great actor popular or a poor actor the rage, and though it has never been absent from the stage, the theatre of the nineties possessed it in relative superabundance. It affected Bernard Shaw to the extent that he was invariably willing to put aside an old theory which considered going to the theatre for the sake of the acting as a mark of adolescence (there was, after all, little else to go for), with the result that he has left scattered throughout his reviews a series of penetrating impressions and analyses which, when pieced together, become sketches or portraits of a remarkably vivid kind. Even in these, however, Shavianism played a part, and the original of one of them, especially, would not be recognized by the majority of Shaw's living contemporaries.⁴³

There have been English actors more famous than Henry Irving but perhaps none more beloved. When Victoria conferred upon him the rank of knighthood, an unparalleled event which finally established the most maligned of professions as respectable, she was simply giving official recognition to a long established fact—the fact, namely, that Sir Henry Irving had become the national symbol of all that was fine in the theatre—good taste, nobility of character, superb showmanship, and all the rest. Alone in his field, he had braved the lethargy of the seventies by establishing at the Lyceum a classical repertory theatre which brilliantly recaptured a waning interest in the drama, made his name world-famous, and, most significant of all, never lost its hold on the public in spite of the fact that its doors were firmly closed

⁴³ I have thought it better to dispense with footnotes in this discussion, except in quotations of considerable length.

to the exponents and propagandists of the modern movement. Now it was this coldness toward Ibsen and the new realism which helped to make Bernard Shaw so implacable a foe of the Irving tradition. He was by no means blind to Irving's virtues or to the great service which he had rendered the theatre in England; at one time, he made a public plea that this service be duly recognized by the crown. He was quite aware that realism in acting owed in many ways as much to Irving, who had substituted a more quietly appealing nobility of sentiment and affection for the "superhuman pretension" of Macready and Barry Sullivan, as did realism in the drama to Robertson. But he knew also that what Irving stood for was a static tradition in drama, and this he could not forgive. One went to the Lyceum to see Sir Henry Irving in whatever historical plays, be they Shakespeare's or Bulwer-Lytton's or Arthur Comyns-Carr's, presented him to best advantage, and even the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies were edited with this end in mind. Rhetoric, pomp, and pageant, "expensively mounted and superlatively dull," were the stock in trade of this actor who, Shaw felt, considered himself "completely independent of the dramatist," and only approached him "in moments of aberration." "I sometimes wonder," wrote Shaw, "where Mr. Irving will go to when he dies—whether he will dare to claim, as a master artist, to walk where he may any day meet Shakespeare whom he has mutilated, Goethe whom he has travestied, and the nameless creator of the hero-king [Arthur] out of whose mouth he has uttered jobbing verses."

Shaw's view of Irving as an actor who had perfected a new rhetorical style which entailed the giving up of a "fundamentally serious social func-

tion for a fundamentally nonsensical theatrical accomplishment" was largely shared by Archer and the realists, who could hardly have failed to see that the new movement could expect nothing from this man who, by reason of his tremendous popularity, might have easily paved its way with gold. But Shaw did not confine himself to castigating Irving for the things he failed to do; meeting him on his own ground, he led a crusade against the long popular use of Shakespeare as a tour-de-force for the actor, a custom whose unpopularity today must in large part be credited to that same Shaw who also led a kind of crusade against Shakespeare himself. This is his portrait of Irving as an interpreter of the Bard's heroes:

A prodigious deal of nonsense has been written about Sir Henry Irving's conception of this, that, and the other Shakespearean character. The truth is that he has never in his life conceived or interpreted the characters of any author except himself. He is really as incapable of acting another man's play as Wagner was of setting another man's libretto; and he should, like Wagner, have written his plays for himself. But as he did not find himself out until it was too late for him to learn that supplementary trade, he was compelled to use other men's plays as the framework for his own creations. His first great success in this sort of adaptation was with *The Merchant of Venice*. There was no question then of a bad Shylock or a good Shylock: he was simply not Shylock at all; and when his own creation came into conflict with Shakespeare's, as it did quite openly in the Trial scene, he simply played in flat contradiction of the lines and positively acted Shakespeare off the stage. This was an original policy, and an intensely interesting one from the critical point of view; but it was obvious that its difficulty must increase with the vividness and force of the dramatist's creation. Shakespeare at his highest pitch cannot be set aside by any mortal actor, however gifted; and when Sir Henry Irving tried to interpolate a most singular and fantastic notion of an old man between the lines of a fearfully mutilated acting version of *Lear*, he was smashed.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Ibid., vol. 24, p. 208.

The famous Irving voice was "an organ with only one stop on it: to the musician it suggests a clarinet in A, played only in the chalumeau register; but then the chalumeau, sympathetically sounded, has a richly melancholy and noble effect." His diction Shaw described as "the excess of a genuine refinement of diction": a "pure vowel method which would lead him to say 'One ap-sorbing thot which mēks a slēv of me' (the p in absorbing being a German b, and the italic letters pronounced as in the French fidèle)."

Shaw's unreserved praise was kept for the Shakespearean acting of the slightly less famous Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, whom he acclaimed over Irving for "playing against him the authentic Swan of Avon." "Charm," "interest," "variety," "a genuine delight in Shakespeare's art," and "a natural familiarity with the plane of his imagination," were among the tributes paid to the work of the actor-manager whom Shaw trusted above all others to alleviate the rarity of genuinely artistic successes. Of the Forbes-Robertson three and a half-hour Hamlet he wrote: "Mr. Forbes-Robertson is essentially a classical actor, the only one, with the exception of Mr. Alexander, now established in London management. What I mean by classical is that he can present a dramatic hero as a man whose passions are those which have produced the philosophy, the poetry, the art, and the statecraft of the world, and not merely those which have produced its weddings, coroner's inquests, and executions. And that is just the sort of actor that Hamlet requires."⁴⁵ Shaw's greatest tribute to Forbes-Robertson was perhaps an unconscious one: On one occasion he found himself admitting that the actor had

⁴⁵For a lengthier discussion of Forbes-Robertson, see "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 24, pp. 210-218.

actually succeeded in lending a kind of interest to, of all things, The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith.

The name of Ellen Terry invariably suggests that of Bernard Shaw, and would do so even without the inseparable link forged by their famous correspondence. Shaw admits that from the first moment he set eyes on her, he was the complete slave of her "irresistible personal charm," and his loyalty never waned. Nowhere in all his criticism does there appear a single harsh word against her. On the contrary, we have his own confession that she "invariably fascinates me so much that I have not the smallest confidence in my own judgment respecting her." Her only shortcoming, in Shaw's view, was her insistence on "wasting her gifts on Shakespeare," but for this he blamed Sir Henry Irving, who seemed to possess a Svengali-like power over her. Shaw's compliments to most actors and actresses were generally restrained and qualified, but not those to Ellen Terry. Her "keenness of intelligence" was "beyond all dissimulation," her stage accomplishments were "unsurpassed." "I am sure," he prophesied, "that her art will not fail her in any play, however difficult, that does not positively antagonise her sympathies." There is, fortunately, one instance in which Shaw manages to incorporate into his own flights of adolescent exuberance an extremely penetrating analysis of the sources of Ellen Terry's great hold on the public. He makes it quite clear that her reputation was not based on her artistic powers alone (which everyone, especially Shaw, well knew), but insists at the same time that she had thoroughly mastered the art of acting:

Miss Terry, as we all know, went on the stage in her childhood, and not only 'picked up' her profession, but was systematically taught it by Mrs. Charles Kean, with the result that to this day her business is always thoroughly well done, and her part gets over the foot-lights to the end of the house without the loss of a syllable or the waste of a stroke. But if Mrs. Charles Kean qualified her to be the heroine of a play, Nature presently qualified her to be the heroine of a picture by making her grow up quite unlike anybody that had ever been seen on earth before. I trust nature has not broken the mold; if she has, Miss Terry's portraits will go down to posterity as those of the only real New Woman, who was never repeated afterwards. The great painters promptly pounced on her...she added what she learnt in the studio to what she had already learnt on the stage so successfully that when I first saw her in Hamlet, it was exactly as if the powers of a beautiful picture of Ophelia had been extended to speaking and singing. It was no doubt her delight in this pictorial art that made her so easily satisfied with old-fashioned rhetorical characters which have no dramatic interest for any intelligent woman nowadays, much less for an ultra-modern talent like Miss Terry's.⁴⁶

This is what Shaw calls the aesthetic or "living picture" type of acting, but he condemned its many imitators who, unlike their chief model, relied wholly on their personal charm. Ellen Terry, he points out, showed herself the born actress in every real touch of nature in her plays. Unfortunately, these were only touches—whatever could be gleaned from the Irving Shakespeare and the works of Sardou, Comyns Carr, and Robert Hichens.

Only one other actress approached even remotely Ellen Terry's place in Shaw's affections, and this was the late Mrs. Patrick Campbell, whom he considered bewitching and glamorous, and for whom he had a soft spot because she was something of an Ibsen enthusiast. He gave her credit for the success of Mrs. Tanqueray and for acting Mrs. Ebbsmith off the stage, he praised the

⁴⁶Ibid., vol. 25, pp. 202-3.

"extraordinary swiftness and certainty of her physical self-command," he thought her a fine Lady Teazle and a true Ophelia. On the other hand, he seems to have taken great pleasure in giving her an occasional dig (her Rita Allmers was "terribly hampered by the unsuitability of the words Ibsen and Mr. Archer have put into her mouth"), he admitted that her Magda was infinitely below that of Duse, and his most detailed analysis of her style is anything but flattering: Bad as Fedora was, "her acting was worse. It was a masterpiece of failure...It cannot, I think, be disputed now that Mrs. Campbell's force, which is intense enough, has only one mode, and that one the vituperative...her emotion declines to take any other form than that of invective. When she is not abusing somebody, she sits visibly concentrating her forces to restrain the vituperative pressure which is struggling to expand in reckless aggression, the general effect being that of a magnificent woman with a magnificent temper, which she holds in or lets loose with exciting uncertainty. This of course means that Mrs. Campbell is not yet mistress of her art, though she has a rare equipment for it. Even her diction is technically defective. In order to secure refinement of tone, she articulates with the tip of her tongue against her front teeth as much as possible. This enters for what it is worth and no more into the method of every fine speaker; but it should not suggest the snobbish Irishman who uses it as a cheap recipe for speaking genteel English."⁴⁷ A few months later he was ready to forget all this in the charm of her person: "Go and see her move, stand, speak, look, kneel—go and breathe the magic atmosphere that is

⁴⁷Ibid., vol. 23, pp. 142-43.

created by the grace of all these ends; and then talk to me about acting, forsooth!"

The most famous actress of her time, Sarah Bernhardt, received much the same treatment from Shaw as did Henry Irving—except that hers was the more severe. Once she retired from her national theatre and began to make personal appearances in Sardou's custom-built models, he lost all respect for her and took every occasion to castigate her work. To him she was a "thoroughly shoppy" actress, with "nothing but her own charm, for the exhibition of which Sardou contrives love scenes." Her obvious commercialism he could not abide:

I confess I regard with a certain jealousy the extent to which this ex-artist, having deliberately exercised her unquestioned right to step down from the national theatre in which she became famous to posture in a traveling show, is still permitted the privileges and courtesies proper to her former rank. It is open to all actresses to say either, 'Give me a dignified living wage and let me work at my art,' or 'Give me as much money and applause as can possibly be got out of me, and let my art go hang!' Only, when the choice is made, it is the business of the critic to see that the chooser of the lower level does not take precedence of the devoted artist who takes the higher one. Madame Bernhardt has elected to go round the world pretending to kill people with hatchets and hairpins, and making, I presume, heaps of money. I wish her every success; but I shall certainly not treat her as a dramatic artist of the first rank unless she pays me well for it. As a self-respecting critic I decline to be bought for nothing.⁴⁸

He admits to a certain prejudice against French acting, saying that except for the work of the geniuses like Coquelin, Réjane, and the pioneers of the Lugné-Poë company, it seems to be simply English acting fifty years out of

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 145.

date. Prejudiced or not, Shaw's analysis of the Bernhardt style is remarkably vivid and suggestive, testifying to his fine capabilities as a critic of acting, especially to his passion for the all-important detail, which is invariably missing from present day critical references to the part of the actor. As Magda, Madame Bernhardt possessed

...the charm of a jolly maturity, rather spoilt and petulant, perhaps, but always ready with a sunshine-through-the-clouds smile if only she is made much of...One feels, when the heroine bursts on the scene, a dazzling vision of beauty, that instead of imposing on you, she adds to her own piquancy by looking you straight in the face and saying in effect: 'Now who would ever suppose that I am a grandmother...' The coaxing suits well with the childishly egotistical character of her acting, which is not the art of making you think more highly or feel more deeply, but the art of making you admire her, pity her, champion her, weep with her, laugh at her jokes, follow her fortunes breathlessly, and applaud her wildly when the curtain falls. It is the art of finding out all your weaknesses and practising on them—cajoling you, harrowing you, exciting you—on the whole, fooling you. And it is always Sarah Bernhardt in her own capacity who does this to you. The dress, the title of the play, the order of the words may vary, but the woman is always the same. She does not enter into the leading character: she substitutes herself for it.⁴⁹

In the same month (June, 1895) Eleanora Duse also portrayed Magda in Sudermann's Home. Before the greatness of her art Shaw was both humble and rhapsodic. With Duse there was no question of glamour or personal charm. She wore no careful makeup, her lips were not carmined, her smile revealed no brilliant teeth. The lines on her face were the credentials of her womanhood. Her every part was a separate creation. "When Duse gives us her best work, we cannot be too emphatic in declaring that it is best of the best and

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 158.

magnificent; so that our hall-mark may be carried through the nations on a piece of sterling gold." Hers was an art of the most careful restraint. "Duse, with a tremor of the lip which you feel rather than see, and which lasts half an instant, touches you straight on the very heart; and there is not a line on the face, or a cold tone in the grey shadow that does not give poignancy to that tremor." For Shaw the mere sight of her was "a confirmation of my sometimes flagging faith that a dramatic critic is really the servant of a high art and not a mere advertiser of entertainments of questionable respectability of motive." His tribute to Duse is also a tribute to himself, for it is a marvel of sensitivity and clarity of perception. But it cannot be paraphrased; it must be read, whole and entire. It is Bernard Shaw objectifying in prose that touches poetry the art of a woman universally recognized as one of the greatest actresses in the theatre's history.⁵⁰

For the reader, this is the great quality of Shaw's criticisms of the actor—the satisfaction that springs from a conviction that the critic has caught the essential and distinctive features of the most intangible of arts and given them a new permanence. He may not always be wholly reliable; indeed he has openly admitted his prejudices so that his readers will not be misled—which is the act of an honest man. The important thing is that he is never satisfied with the hazy impressions or fragmentary analyses which generally substitute for true criticism and which betray the inadequacy of most critics as men who either have formed no definite impression or are unable to give it words. He is not content to sum up the totality of effect produced

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 158-170.

by any one actor: he takes pains to expose the nature of its component parts. Diction, tone of voice, dress, posture, personal mannerisms, temperament, originality of interpretation—all are subjected to the dissecting gaze of a man of intense love, both native and tutored, for every art that contributes to the creation of drama. He has left us either a sketch or a portrait of every notable actor of his times. And to the man who tells us that some of them, perhaps all, are distorted, we can only reply that the task was gigantic and the critic a human being. We may then ask our objector to tell us which of his colleagues has left us so much.

8. The Censorship

The institution of the dramatic censorship in England has become a tradition, and therefore nothing can be done about it. Bernard Shaw tried to effect a change. So did Archer and Grein and Galsworthy. So in recent years have St. John Ervine, Rose Macaulay, Noel Coward, and the producers of The Green Pastures. But the censorship is still there, essentially the same as it was almost two hundred years ago, when Walpole set it up as a means of silencing the political satires of Henry Fielding. It has helped to make the English drama weaker than the English novel, it tried to halt the modern dramatic movement from the very beginning and succeeded in driving it underground, and it stands even now as a kind of monstrous anachronism, tolerated because practically everybody thinks there ought to be some kind of censorship and feels that any change in the present system might make matters worse. It is controlled by the Lord Chamberlain, who delegates his powers to

a gentleman known as the Examiner of Plays. This man, who holds office by appointment and who is required to possess no special distinction as a dramatist, theologian, or philosopher, has the right to certify all plays intended for production as either fit or unfit for public performance, which he does on receipt of a small fee.

This is the system which Bernard Shaw has been fulminating against ever since the nineties, hitting at the lack of qualifications tolerated in the chief reader and raging at such absurd rules of his code as the one which forbids the portrayal of certain religious and historical figures on the stage on the apparent theory that the theatre is bent on doing them some untold harm.⁵¹ It is, however, his objections to censorship in general which shall concern us here, having as they do a value independent of any purely local or national situation. We have already discussed Shaw's fundamental reason for opposing the idea of censorship in its natural relation to his philosophy, concluding that it is logically unsound for all who do not accept the premise which makes the destruction of existing institutions a necessary condition of progress. But his failure here is not surprising. Neither Shaw nor anyone else has ever been able to prove that the theory of censorship is unsound; indeed Shaw himself long ago gave up the task and has since devoted himself to proving the truth of a long familiar paradox: that the censorship of the drama (or of any of the arts), sound enough in theory, is (or at least

⁵¹For Shaw's discussion of this question through the years, see "Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, pp. 50-57, "The Author's Apology for Mrs. Warren's Profession," vol. 7, p. 178ff., The North American Review, vol. 169, pp. 251-62 (July, 1899), The Nation, vol. 2, pp. 237-39 (Nov. 16, 1907), and The Spectator, vol. 135, pp. 261-62 (Aug. 15, 1925).

has been) unsound in practice, insofar as it invariably defeats its own purpose.

Which plays, asks Shaw, suffer most from the censorship? Is it the musical comedies or the farces, openly and intentionally vile and generally as lewd as possible? Not at all. They are clothed in evening dress and given a strange air of respectability, simply because they have no other purpose than to be "naughtily" amusing through ambiguous or risqué jests on the problems of sexual relationship. Performers skilled in this sort of thing have it in their power to remove all possible ambiguity and to substitute open bawdiness by means of simple gestures, looks, and intonations, a form of artistry which is largely beyond the control of any censor. So it is that Gentleman Joe and A Night Out are allowed to go their way unmolested, catering to the lowest tastes under the benign gaze of the local authorities. Meantime what happens to serious plays on similar subjects? Shaw cites the fate of his own Mrs. Warren's Profession as a case in point. It is a study of prostitution, based on the theory that this vicious social evil is a product of economic slavery and organized vice rings and one which can be eradicated only through the removal of its causes. The play was first refused a license in 1894, later granted one after considerable revision, and finally produced (but only by a free theatre) in 1902, to the accompaniment of the outraged protests which had also greeted the works of Ibsen. Three years later, in New York, Arnold Daly and his whole company were arrested and jailed for producing the same work. Why? asks Shaw. Because the play was extremely frank and even nasty—in the same sense that prostitution is nasty.

It could not honestly be anything else and still serve its purpose. Clothed in finery, easy wit, and sophistication, however (or with the vice made attractive, as in the farces), it would have aroused no controversy whatever, the code of the censor evidently being that vice disguised and sugar-coated is vice no longer. It is no refutation of his argument, thinks Shaw, to say that the theatre is no place for this type of social drama, for if this is true, how much less so is it the place for the type which treats the same problems jestingly.

Even discounting the personal side of Shaw's thesis, no one who has studied the workings of censorship can fail to see that he is right. As far as London is concerned, one does not have to look for a Mrs. Warren's Profession or a Les Avariés to discover that censorship often defeats its own purpose. A censor who bans such a work as The Green Pastures while approving of (to take relatively mild examples) Design for Living or Amphitryon 38 reflects a most peculiar official view of the nature of morality. Yet even outside of London, which is, after all, an exceptional case, the effect may be the same. Censorship in the United States is less severe, probably, than that of any other country. Nevertheless, only a few years ago, a city world-renowned for its corruption, banned two plays, Tobacco Road and The Children's Hour, both of which have at least some merits as serious entertainment, but silently approved of farces like Kiss the Boys Good-Bye and Yes, My Darling Daughter, the latter of which outdid a decade of its partners for immorality, its "humor" resting entirely on the problem, seriously considered, of whether the darling daughter should be allowed to enjoy a week-

end of fornication, as most of her family had done at one time or another. If the former plays deserved to be banned, how much more so did the latter!

Shaw's plea that formal censorship be abolished in favor of "the natural check of public opinion" is perhaps not so naive after all. If the system cannot function consistently, if it tolerates flagrant evil and forbids much that is good, why have it at all? The answer is also Shaw's: A play is a moral act, and there are some people who by their patronage will encourage anything, no matter how bad. True licentiousness is not to be tolerated, and the author or the producer of a really licentious play should be held responsible for its consequences. But what can be done officially? Shaw is unable to say, since every known censorship has failed so often to accomplish its purpose that defects which are logically accidental to it have taken on the nature of those which are essential. This is why civil censorship is, in a sense, sound in theory and unsound in practice. This is why Shaw is right in holding that it must be almost entirely a matter for the individual theatregoer, guided by the only censor—religious authority apart—who, following the principles of his moral code can really say what is good for him to see and what is not—his conscience. To accept such a conclusion one need be neither a Shavian nor a Protestant. The Roman Index is small in size, not because books hostile to the faith are few, but because the men who make it have realized how important a part the attitude and principles of the individual reader must play in determining the morality (the goodness or badness) of any given work. And if "the most ancient, learned, and august" censorship in the world today, operating solely for men of the same general religious

and moral principles, finds its task fraught with difficulties, how well-nigh insuperable must be the problems confronting a purely civil censorship intended for men of all moral codes and of none.

9. Shaw vs. Shakespeare

If, during the heyday of the drainage era, Mr. H. L. Mencken had suddenly released all the power of his irony, wit, and sarcasm in a dogmatic attack on the character and ambitions of Abraham Lincoln, and then kept up the attack for the next ten years, he would have undoubtedly become the most famous, or rather infamous, critic of modern American journalism. His name would now be a household word, and mothers and fathers who had never come any closer to The American Mercury than The Oswego Journal would point him out to their children as the arch-scoundrel of modern times, the leering traitor who wilfully smashed and stamped on every famous portrait and image of his country's greatest hero. His purpose in doing so (and even his evidence, if he had any) would have made not the slightest difference to the majority of Americans; the enormity of his guilt would have been such as to transcend any possible defense or explanation.

In England Bernard Shaw came very close to this pit of degradation when he began to cast slurs at the work of Arthur Wing Pinero. He came closer still when he championed Ibsen against the best traditions of English society. And finally, when he dared to question the eminence of Shakespeare himself, who had in some strange way become the symbol of everything that was noble in England, he fell right into it. But he was not silenced. During the ten

years between 1895 and 1905 he captured the attention, largely indignant, of the whole country, filling the pages of the Saturday Review with the most outrageous and unheard-of assaults on the reputation of Shakespeare ("I have never hesitated to give our immortal William as much of what he deserves as is possible, considering how far his enormities transcend my powers of invective") and later turning to the lecture platform to continue his major work of iconoclasm. His wit was remembered, but his arguments were forgotten or distorted and his original purpose completely lost sight of, the net result of the whole business at the time being a conviction on the part of the general public that Shaw was a cunning monster who put his talents to diabolical uses, and on the part of the actors, playwrights, and critics (including Frank Harris and Henry Arthur Jones) that he was no critic at all, but a rather cheap kind of sensation-hunter. Even his biographer has termed the episode "one of the most amusing of his campaigns to attract attention."⁵² Shaw himself, as we have seen, has in late years apologized for the vehemence of his attack, charging it to the tremendous impact of Ibsen and Wagner on the artistic world. Nevertheless, his opinion of Shakespeare is an essential part of his character: he has never really changed it and never will, unless he first changes the philosophy of which it is a product. The astonishing thing about the whole controversy, in retrospect, lies not in anything that Shaw said, but in the inability of his detractors to overcome the horror aroused in them by hearing Shakespeare criticized at all, much less to seize the essential point of Shaw's argument and to evaluate it for what it was worth.

⁵²Henderson, Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet, p. 317.

Had Shaw been content, with William Archer, to confine his denunciations to Shakespeare's contemporaries, the whole storm might have blown over. Shaw, like Archer, detested the Elizabethans, with their tangled plots, their sensational horrors, and their bombastic verse, and believed that Shakespeare's survival was due to his relegation of these elements to the position of inorganic theatrical accessories, mere pretexts for dramatizing real human character. He has survived, in other words, by what he has in common with Ibsen and not by what he has in common with Webster and the rest:

What Shakespeare got from his 'school' was the insane and hideous rhetoric which is all that he has in common with Jonson, Webster, and the whole crew of insufferable bunglers and dullards whose work stands out as vile even at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when every art was corrupted to the marrow by the orgie called the Renaissance, which was nothing but the vulgar exploitation in the artistic professions of the territory won by the Protestant movement. The leaders of that great self-assertion of the growing spirit of man were dead long before the Elizabethan literary rabble became conscious that 'ideas' were in fashion, and that any author who could gather a cheap stock of them from murder, lust, and obscenity, and formulate them in rhetorical blank verse, might make the stage pestiferous with plays that have no ray of noble feeling, no touch of faith, beauty, or even common kindness in them from beginning to end.⁵³

Shaw is quite ready to admit that Shakespeare towered above his contemporaries in these respects, and, in fact, contends that the relative palatability of Beaumont and Fletcher and of others who followed him can be set down to the power of his influence. It was not so much what Shakespeare did that brought down the wrath of G.B.S., but what he failed to do.

⁵³"Our Theatres," Works, vol. 23, p. 137. Following the practice of American editors generally, I have used the traditional spelling of the Bard's name instead of Shaw's version, "Shakespear."

When England turned down Ibsen and remained loyal to Shakespeare, Shaw's annoyance soon became anger. It was not the Bard himself that he objected to, but the senseless idolatry with which he was worshipped in the English-speaking world, where he was considered not simply a wonderful playwright (which Shaw was quite willing to grant), but a man who combined all the powers of moralist, ethicist, and prophet in such a degree that no one else could hope to approach him, much less dare to question his eminence. Now the truth of the matter is obviously that Shakespeare was neither moralist nor philosopher: he had no doctrines to teach, no system to expound. For Shaw, to whom the philosophical aspects of the drama were all important, he was really a kind of precursor of the "art for art's sake" movement, the utter lack of any intellectual or moral purpose in his plays being their major defect. Why, then, should he be deified on the score of qualities which he clearly did not possess, while Ibsen, who possessed them abundantly, was scorned? Shaw's was essentially the same position that William James was soon to take in America, that Tolstoy had already taken (unknown to Shaw) in Russia. This is how Tolstoy put it:

If people wrote of Shakespeare that for his time he was a good writer, that he had a fairly good turn for verse, was an intelligent actor and good stage manager—even were this appreciation incorrect and somewhat exaggerated—if only it were moderately true, people of the rising generation might remain free from Shakespeare's influence. But when every young man entering into life has presented to him, as the model of moral perfection, not the religious and moral teachers of mankind, but first of all Shakespeare, concerning whom it has been decided and is handed down by learned men from generation to generation, as an incon-

testable truth, that he was the greatest poet, the greatest teacher of life, the young man cannot remain free from this pernicious influence.⁵⁴

Shaw determined to destroy the "great teacher" theory once and for all, and to restore Shakespeare to the only plane on which it was possible for an intelligent person to admire him. Unfortunately, the audacity of his approach, while extremely amusing, was hardly well calculated to win support for his arguments, and indeed, as we have seen, had the opposite effect.

Shaw's opinion of the Bard's intellectual and moral powers is revealed in comparisons between Shakespeare and three of his own favorite authors, John Bunyan, Henrik Ibsen, and George Bernard Shaw. As for the latter: "With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare when I measure my mind against his. The intensity of my impatience with him occasionally reaches such a pitch that it would positively be a relief to me to dig him up and throw stones at him, knowing as I do how incapable he and his worshippers are of understanding any less obvious form of indignity. To read Cymbeline and to think of Goethe, of Wagner, of Ibsen, is, for me, to imperil the habit of studied moderation which years of public responsibility as a journalist have made almost second nature in me."⁵⁵

In begging Archer not to mention Shakespeare and Ibsen in the same breath, as if he were doing honor to the latter, Shaw becomes more definite and less purely abusive:

⁵⁴Tolstoy on Shakespeare, p. 122.

⁵⁵"Our Theatres," Works, vol. 24, p. 205.

I do most earnestly beg the inhabitants of this island to be extremely careful how they compare any foreigner to Shakespeare. The foreigner can know nothing of Shakespeare's power over language. He can only judge him by his intellectual force and dramatic insight, quite apart from his beauty of expression. From such a test Ibsen comes out with a double first-class. Shakespeare comes out hardly anywhere...In any language of the world Brand, Peer Gynt, and Emperor or Galilean prove their author a thinker of extraordinary penetration and a moralist of international influence. Turn from them to *To be or not to be*, or *The Seven Ages of Man* and imagine, if you can, anybody more critical than a village school-master being imposed on by such platitudinous fudge. The comparison does not honor Ibsen: it makes Shakespeare ridiculous; and for both their sakes it should not be drawn. If we cannot for once let the poor Bard alone, let us humbly apologize to Ibsen for our foolish worship of a foolish collection of shallow proverbs in blank verse.⁵⁶

Finally, in the comparison with Bunyan, he castigates what he takes to be Shakespeare's real philosophy, as it is reflected in some of the plays:

...with extravagant artistic powers, he understood nothing and believed nothing. Thirty-six big plays in five blank verse acts, and (as Mr. Ruskin, I think, once pointed out) not a single hero! Only one man in them all who believes in life, enjoys life, thinks life worth living, and has a sincere unrhetorical tear dropped over his death-bed; and that man—Falstaff! What a crew they are—these Saturday to Monday athletic stockbroker Orlandos, these villains, fools, clowns, drunkards, cowards, intriguers, fighters, lovers, patriots, hypochondriacs who mistake themselves (and are mistaken by the author) for philosophers, princes without any sense of public duty, futile pessimists who imagine they are confronting a barren and unmeaning world when they are only contemplating their own worthlessness, self-seekers of all kinds, keenly observed and masterfully drawn from the romantic-commercial point of view...But search for statesmanship, or even citizenship, or any sense of the commonwealth, material or spiritual, and you will not find the making of a decent vestryman or curate in the whole horde. As to faith, hope, courage, conviction,

⁵⁶Ibid., vol. 25, p. 362.

or any of the true heroic qualities, you find nothing but death made sensational, despair made stage-sublime, sex made romantic, and barrenness covered up by sentimentality and the mechanical lilt of blank verse.

All that you miss in Shakespeare you find in Bunyan, to whom the true heroic came quite obviously and naturally. The world was to him a more terrible place than it was to Shakespeare; but he saw through it a path at the end of which a man might look not only forward to the Celestial City, but back on his life and say: 'Tho with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get them.' The heart vibrates like a bell to such an utterance as this: to turn from it to 'Out, out, brief candle,' and 'The rest is silence,' and 'We are such stuff as dreams are made of; and our little life is rounded by a sleep' is to turn from life, strength, resolution, morning air, and eternal youth, to the terrors of a drunken nightmare.⁵⁷

Shaw thus introduced a new note into the argument. It was no longer the lack of any philosophical system that he objected to, but the quality which Shakespeare substituted for it—a kind of doctrinaire pessimism everywhere apparent in many of his greatest plays. For Shaw, as well as for Tolstoy, this made him not simply unmoral, but immoral.

What of Shakespeare's achievements? Even while decrying the weakness of his intellectual powers, Shaw kept them in mind. "I am bound to add," he wrote, "that I pity the man who cannot enjoy Shakespeare. He has outlasted thousands of abler thinkers, and will outlast a thousand more. His gift of telling a story (provided someone else told it to him first); his enormous power over language, as conspicuous in his senseless and silly abuse of it as in his miracles of expression; his humor; his sense of idiosyncratic

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 1-3.

character; and his prodigious fund of that vital energy which is, it seems, the true differential property between the faculties, good, bad or indifferent, of the man of genius, enable him to entertain us so effectively that the imaginary scenes and people he has created become more real to us than our actual life—at least, until our knowledge and grip of actual life begins to deepen and glow beyond the common."⁵⁸ Again and again Shaw pays tribute to Shakespeare's command of language, to the quality of music which he considered the greatest glory of the plays and which alone made the works of his apprenticeship worth remembering. As for Shakespeare's contribution to the work of his own circle, Shaw concludes that he "raised the desperation and cynicism of its outlook to something like sublimity in his tragedies; dramatized its morbid, self-centered passions and its feeble and shallow speculations with all the force that was in them; disinfected it by copious doses of romantic poetry, fun, and common sense; and gave to its perpetual sex-obsession the relief of individual character and feminine winsomeness."⁵⁹

In considering Shaw's application of these principles to some of the plays, one cannot fail to notice how the non-dramatic objection is so often allowed to predominate, to become the criterion of their ultimate worth.

Twelfth Night and A Midsummer Night's Dream, two of Shaw's greatest favorites, he considered "crown jewels of dramatic poetry," remarking quite admirably that the latter must inevitably defeat the efforts of any scene-painter. (To his credit, he greatly encouraged the Elizabethan Stage Society in its efforts to simplify the staging of Shakespeare.) Richard III was "the best

⁵⁸Ibid., vol. 24, p. 206.

⁵⁹Ibid., vol. 25, p. 5.

of all the versions of Punch and Judy." But few of the others came off so easily:

All's Well That Ends Well: "Among Shakespeare's earlier plays, All's Well that Ends Well stands out artistically by the sovereign charm of the young Helena and the old Countess of Rousillon, and intellectually by the experiment, repeated nearly three hundred years later in A Doll's House of making the hero a perfectly ordinary young man, whose unimaginative prejudices and selfish conventionality make him cut a very fine mean figure in the atmosphere created by the nobler nature of his wife."⁶⁰

Romeo and Juliet: "It should never be forgotten in judging an attempt to play Romeo and Juliet that the parts are made almost impossible, except to actors of positive genius, by the way in which the poetry, magnificent as it is, is interlarded by the miserable rhetoric and silly logical conceits which were the foible of the Elizabethans. When Juliet comes out on her balcony and, having propounded the question, 'What's in a name?' proceeds to argue it out like an amateur attorney in Christmas-card verse of the 'rose by any other name' order, no actress can make it appear natural to a century which has discovered the art of giving prolonged and intense dramatic expression to pure feeling alone, without any skeleton of argument or narrative, by means of music. Romeo has lines that tighten the heart or catch you up into the heights, alternating with heartless fustian and silly ingenuities that make you curse Shakespeare's stagestruckness and his youthful inability to keep his brains quiet."⁶¹

⁶⁰Ibid., vol. 23, p. 28.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 213-14.

Henry IV: "Everything that charm of style, rich humor and vivid and natural characterization can do for a play are badly wanted by Henry IV, which has neither the romantic beauty of Shakespeare's earlier plays nor the tragic greatness of the later ones. One can hardly forgive Shakespeare quite for the worldly phase in which he tried to thrust such a Jingo hero as his Harry V down our throats. The combination of conventional propriety and brute force in his public capacity with a low-lived blackguardism in his private tastes is not a pleasant one."⁶²

Othello: "...pure melodrama. There is not a touch of character in it that goes below the skin; and the fitful attempts to make Iago something better than a melodramatic villain only makes a hopeless mess of him and his motives. To anyone capable of reading the play with an open mind as to its merits, it is obvious that Shakespeare plunged through it so impetuously that he had it finished before he had made up his mind as to the character and motives of a single person in it."⁶³

Julius Caesar: "It is when we turn to Julius Caesar, the most splendidly written political melodrama we possess, that we realize the apparently immortal author of Hamlet as a man, not for all time, but for an age only, and that, too, in all solidly wise and heroic aspects, the most despicable of all the ages in our history. It is impossible for even the most judicially minded critic to look without a revulsion of indignant contempt at this travestying of a great man as a silly braggart, whilst the pitiful gang of mischief-makers who destroyed him are lauded as statesmen and patriots.

⁶²Ibid., vol. 24, p. 134.

⁶³Ibid., vol. 25, p. 154.

There is not a single sentence uttered by Shakespeare's Julius Caesar that is, I will not say worthy of him, but even worthy of an average Tammany boss."⁶⁴

Antony and Cleopatra: "...must needs be as intolerable to the true Puritan as it is vaguely distressing to the ordinary healthy citizen, because, after giving a faithful picture of the soldier broken down by debauchery, and the typical wanton in whose arms such men perish, Shakespeare finally strains all his huge command of rhetoric and stage pathos to give a theatrical sublimity to the wretched end of the business and to persuade foolish spectators that the world was well lost by the twain."⁶⁵

Finally, in the spring of 1905, after hearing all kinds of garbled versions of the opinions he had expressed in his lectures, Shaw sent to the London Daily Mail twelve assertions containing the essentials of his case for and against Shakespeare. With minor omissions, they follow:

1. That the idolatry of Shakespeare which prevails now, existed in his own time and got on the nerves of Ben Jonson. [Cf. the preface to The Dark Lady of the Sonnets.]
2. That Shakespeare, when he became an actor, was a member and part proprietor of a regular company, holding himself as exclusively above the casual barn-stormer as a Harley Street consultant holds himself above a man with a sarsaparilla stall.
3. That Shakespeare was not an illiterate poaching laborer, but a gentleman with all the social pretensions of our higher bourgeoisie.
4. That Shakespeare's aim in business was to make money enough to acquire land in Stratford, and to retire as a country gentleman with a coat of arms and good standing in the county.
5. That Shakespeare found that the only thing that paid in the theatre was

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 314.

⁶⁵Preface to "Caesar and Cleopatra," Works, vol. 9, p. xxxi.

romantic nonsense, and that when he was forced by this to produce one of the most effective samples of romantic nonsense in existence, he publicly disclaimed any responsibility for its pleasant and cheap falsehood by borrowing the story and throwing it in the face of the public with the phrase 'As You Like It.'

7. That Shakespeare tried to make the public accept real studies of life and character in—for instance—'Measure for Measure' and 'All's Well that Ends Well'; and that the public would not have them, and remains of the same mind still, preferring a fantastic sugar doll, like Rosalind, to such serious and dignified studies of women as Isabella and Helena.
8. That the people who spoil paper and waste ink by describing Rosalind as a perfect type of womanhood are the descendants of the same block-heads whom Shakespeare had to please when he wrote plays as they liked them.
9. Not, as has been erroneously stated, that I could write a better play than 'As You Like It,' but that I actually have written much better ones, and in fact never wrote anything, and never intend to write anything, half so bad in matter. (In manner and art nobody can write better than Shakespeare, because he did the thing as well as it can be done within the limits of human faculty.)
10. That to anyone with the requisite ear and command of words, blank verse—written under the amazingly loose conditions which Shakespeare claimed, with full liberty to use all sorts of words, colloquial, technical, rhetorical, and even obscurely technical, and to indulge in the most far-fetched ellipses—is the easiest of all known modes of literary expression, and that this is why whole oceans of dull bombast and drivel have been emptied on the head of England since Shakespeare's time.
11. That Shakespeare's power lies in his enormous command of word-music, which gives fascination to his most blackguardly repartees and sublimity to his hollowest platitudes.
12. That Shakespeare's weakness lies in his complete deficiency in that highest sphere of thought, in which poetry embraces religion, philosophy, morality, and the bearing of these on communities, which is sociology. That his characters have no religion, no politics, no conscience, no hope, no convictions of any sort. That there are, as Ruskin pointed out, no heroes in Shakespeare. That his test of the worth of life is the vulgar hedonistic test, and that since life cannot be justified by this or any other external test, Shakespeare comes out

of his reflective period a vulgar pessimist, oppressed with a logical demonstration that life is not worth living.⁶⁶

Always he comes back to this last objection. The first four are simply matters for the historian, which may or may not be true in full, and which are of relatively little significance. The fifth, seventh, and eighth are gratuitous assumptions which, if true, tend to put the brunt of Shaw's charges on the age rather than the man. The ninth is Shaw's modest way of emphasizing the manner in which he is superior to Shakespeare. The tenth, even were it true, proves nothing, for the telling point is not whether it is easy to write any kind of blank verse, but whether it is easy to write good blank verse, and Shaw's own phrase, "oceans of dull bombast," with reference to the Bard's successors, is the answer. The eleventh is a simple statement of what Shaw considers Shakespeare's greatest gift. But the twelfth is all important: It is the essence of the whole controversy, expressing as it does Shaw's basic objection to the works of Shakespeare and motivating all the sarcasm, the vituperation, the wild exaggerations that mark the various strictures here quoted. It is on this point that Shaw's case against Shakespeare must stand or fall.

It falls—and the noise of its fall is deafening. But it does not fall simply because Shaw dared to criticize Shakespeare, nor is it any refutation of Shaw's arguments to abuse him wildly or to dismiss him contemptuously without pointing out exactly how he is wrong. That is why Henry Arthur Jones was worse than Shaw, when he wrote:

⁶⁶Quoted by Felix Grendon in "Shakespeare and Shaw," Sewanee Review, vol. 16, p. 169-70.

You would dig up Shakespeare and desecrate his dead remains, whose living works forever call upon England to know the greatness of his strength and to stamp her traitors under her foot, you would do this, you who delight to desecrate everything that, dead or living, commands the reverence of mankind. Will not they who do understand Shakespeare, all his lovers in all his England, join common cause with them who today behold us cankered with internal treason, and gathering themselves together upon Shakespeare's next birthday, dig you out, and throw stones at you, and hunt you all the way to Shakespeare's Cliff, and, making it our Tarpeian Rock, fling you from its top, that Shakespeare's land may be for ever purged of you?⁶⁷

It is also why we cannot accept Frank Harris' weak attempt to toss off the whole thing as unworthy of anybody's attention: "...Shaw's sole contribution to our knowledge of Shakespeare is the coupling of him with Dickens, which is very much the same thing as if he tried to explain Titian by coupling him with Hogarth. This, in my opinion, was Shaw's only original observation on the subject of Shakespeare, and its perfect originality I should be the last to deny to this day."⁶⁸ Shaw's coupling of Shakespeare with Dickens was perfectly logical, from Shaw's own point of view; and it is this which Frank Harris failed to understand.

In pointing out that Shakespeare had no system to preach, that there is no apparent philosophy unifying his works, Shaw is undoubtedly correct. One can no more write a "Quintessence of Shakespeareanism" from the works of Shakespeare than one can write a "Quintessence of Dickensianism" from the works of Dickens. Anyone who doubts this has either not read the plays of Shakespeare or is reading his own philosophy into them, which is generally

⁶⁷From a letter to H. G. Wells. Quoted by Henderson, op. cit., p. 321.

⁶⁸Harris, Bernard Shaw, pp. 252-53.

the case. It is only when Shaw attempts to use this absence of didacticism (for this is what it amounts to) as an argument against Shakespeare's greatness that we cannot agree with him. But this is not illogical on Shaw's part. We have already analyzed the kind of drama which to him was most desirable, the kind in which art is made to subserve a social purpose. The plays of Shakespeare cannot be included in this category; therefore, as far as Shaw is concerned, they do not represent the most noble form of art, in spite of the fact that most of them are immensely entertaining, and a few even inspiring. Shaw's criterion is the product of an age in which the sense of the tragic came more and more to be considered not a matter of individual guilt, but of social evil. Accordingly, Shakespeare's superb exposition of human character (plus the other qualities he credits him with) is for Shaw not enough. We cannot agree with him. The verdict of the ages is against him. The horizons of art are wider than those of Bernard Shaw. But we can at least take the trouble to understand him, which so many of his contemporaries did not, and we can answer him in the words of one of his friendlier critics: "Shakespeare was a poet, not a prophet. But what a poet! We need not complain that our modern dramatists are not poets too. But neither need we count it to them as a merit. Their drama is social criticism; and we need social criticism. But we need poetry too; and without it we shall not make much of the new society to which we are moving."⁶⁹

How much better it would have been for his reputation as a critic had Shaw been content to make the most of this charge and let it go at that. The

⁶⁹G. Lowes Dickinson, "Shakespear, Ibsen, and Mr. Bernard Shaw." Living Age, vol. 250, p. 440.

Shakespeare controversy has become his most famous (though it is his most unfortunate) critical foray; and people who may not even know that Shaw was once a professional critic remember him as a playwright who thought himself better than Shakespeare. This, however, can all be explained away without necessarily lessening anyone's respect for Shaw or even one's faith in his better judgment. The thing which cannot be explained away, and the one which must make even his most devoted admirer wonder how he could bring himself to level it, is his ridiculous and utterly baseless charge against Shakespeare of pessimism and hedonism. No biographical evidence supports the contention. But this did not deter Shaw. He collected a series of random remarks on the nature of life—"We are such stuff as dreams are made of," "Out, out, brief candle," etc.—isolated them from their contexts, concluded, in the face of all sanity, that they represented Shakespeare's own beliefs (as if an author were to be held personally responsible for every opinion of his characters), added a still wilder charge of hedonism, which he did not even attempt to prove, and calmly offered the whole fabrication to the public under the name of criticism. No wonder Henry Arthur Jones lost control of himself! The only charitable conclusion to be drawn (and one should be charitable, for he never wrote anything else so hopelessly silly) is that Shaw was not only profoundly affected by Ibsenism, but at this stage was positively deranged by it. If his later apology was made with anything definite in mind, surely it must have been this very onslaught. Let us accept it as such. And let us forgive Shaw—not for being unfaithful to Shakespeare (whose greatness, after all, is above such trifling), but for something that

was much worse—for being unfaithful to himself.

Was Frank Harris right, then, in maintaining that Shaw made absolutely no contribution whatever to the field of Shakespearean criticism? (That his articles tend to clarify and confirm his own aesthetic and are therefore helpful to the student of Shaw should by this time be clear.) I think not. It is true that Shaw has told us little or nothing about the plays themselves, which he treated in a general and sketchy kind of way, using them as mere adjuncts for the proof of his major proposition. As for the latter, he succeeded, not in establishing it, but only in turning other critics against him for the absurdity of so many of his arguments. Yet his crusade was not wholly unproductive. Oddly enough, it was Shaw himself who, with surprising modesty, discerned in his Shakespearean criticism the one element which has made it valuable even for those who cannot accept the Shavian standard: "My criticism of Shakespeare is too negative to be of much use except to discredit the senseless eulogies which are current."⁷⁰ Shaw knew much about the Londoners' (playgoers and critics both) tastes for Shakespeare; he knew how much of it was hypocrisy, how much of it was stimulated by the appearance of favorite performers, how much by a sense of national duty, and how little on a genuine love for the Bard, based on a thorough knowledge of what he had to say. Not that his own knowledge of Shakespeare was perfect by any means. But he did know, and he made it clear, that Shakespeare was neither a great philosopher nor a great teacher in the sense that his eulogists claimed. And he knew that nobody was ever going to learn any more about Shakespeare's

⁷⁰Shaw's note to Felix Grendon's "Shakespeare and Shaw," op. cit., p. 169. (Italics mine.)

artistry, its virtues and its defects, if the Bard himself was to be made an idol whom it was treason to criticize. Shaw may not have been the first to protest against this growing and dangerous idolatry of Shakespeare. "He was, however, the first to war persistently and relentlessly upon a passionate apotheosis which, he insisted, was utterly destructive of genuine criticism."⁷¹ And the result—in a rather more typical Shavian version: "When I began to write, William was a divinity and a bore. Now he is a fellow creature."⁷²

10. Valedictory

On May 21, 1898, Shaw's career as a professional critic came to an end. Since New Year's Day, 1895, he had contributed a weekly article on the London theatre to the Saturday Review. Ten years earlier he had begun as an art critic, and later he took to the criticism of music. All told, he devoted a decade of his life to journalistic criticism, writing almost one million words in support of his various causes. It did not make him rich. In 1885 he received £117 for his efforts; in 1898 he was earning £500. It would have taken him six years of journalism to make the equivalent of the stage royalties from The Devil's Disciple alone. Concluding that "journalism is a young man's standby, not an old man's profession," he resigned his position, and Max Beerbohm was appointed his successor.

Now all of these things are true—but they do not really explain his resignation. Nothing as simple as the desire for a larger income ever could. Even the advice of his physicians against the continuance of a too active

⁷¹Grendon, ibid.

⁷²"Our Theatres," Works, vol. 25, p. 406.

life, and the fact that in another month he was to assume the duties of a husband, do not seem sufficient to account for it. When Shaw confessed that he was unable to justify the four years he had spent on dramatic criticism, it was not money he was thinking of, nor the state of his health: It was the condition of the drama in England. He was too much the optimist ever to confess failure, but within himself he knew that the theatre had not really changed in those years; the playwrights, the actors, and the managers had resisted his crusade, and, dramatically, England lagged further behind the continent than ever. What had he to show for all his work? Apparently, nothing. (Not having the gift of divination, he could not then see that this was the traditional darkness before the dawn.) It was probably this maddening consideration, more than anything else, that drove him to playwriting as his full-time work, in the conviction that if he could not change the theatre by precept, he would do it by example. As a matter of fact he did both. But the realization of all this was to come later. When Shaw left the Saturday Review, he ended his journalistic career as he had begun it—laughing:

Now I ask, is it reasonable to expect me to spend my life in this way? For just consider my position. Do I receive any spontaneous recognition for the prodigies of skill and industry I lavish on an unworthy institution and a stupid public? Not a bit of it: half my time is spent in telling people what a clever man I am. It is no use merely doing clever things in England. The English do not know what to think until they are coached, laboriously and insistently for years, in the proper and becoming opinion. For ten years past, with an unprecedented pertinacity and obstination, I have been dinning into the public head that I am an extraordinarily witty, brilliant, and clever man. That is now part of the public opinion of England; and no power in heaven or on earth will ever change it. I may dodder and dote; I may potboil and

platitudinize; I may become the butt and chopping-block of all the bright, original spirits of the rising generation; but my reputation shall not suffer: it is built up fast and solid, like Shakespeare's, on an impregnable basis of dogmatic reiteration.

...Then there are the managers. Are they grateful? No: they are simply forbearing. Instead of looking up to me as their guide, philosopher, and friend, they regard me merely as the author of a series of weekly outrages on their profession and their privacy...I can never justify to myself the spending of four years on dramatic criticism. I have sworn an oath to endure no more of it. Never again will I cross the threshold of a theatre. The subject is exhausted; and so am I.

Still the gaiety of nations must not be eclipsed. The long string of beautiful ladies who are at present in the square without, awaiting, under the supervision of two gallant policemen, their turn at my bedside, must be reassured when they protest, as they will, that the light of their life will go out if my dramatic articles cease. To each of them I will present the flower left by her predecessor, and assure her that there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. The younger generation is knocking at the door; and as I open it there steps spritely in the incomparable Max.

For the rest, let Max speak for himself. I am off duty for ever, and am going to sleep.⁷³

⁷³Ibid., p. 407.

IV.

SHAVIAN CRITICISM: AN EVALUATION

As far as Shaw's criticisms in themselves are concerned, our work of evaluation has largely been completed. Their journalistic freshness, their wit, sarcasm, irony, their maddening egotism, their penetrating analyses, their biases and prejudices—and the philosophy which gave rise to them—all have been discussed at some length, praised and condemned, in the preceding chapters. And while it would be a simple matter to continue in this vein, it would also be pointless. It is obvious that Shaw's criticisms have an intrinsic, independent value—otherwise they would hardly be worth reading—the nature of which should by this time be clear. It was recognized by many of his contemporaries, among whom none was more enthusiastic than the American impressionist, James Huneker, who in 1906 edited a selection of them and who considered Shaw's criticism "his best work, the very pith of the man," containing "his most buoyant prose, the quintessence of Shaw."¹ The Spectator felt that "not one of these criticisms is without something extremely well said, and is not gay reading from first to last."² The Atlantic Monthly concluded that they "deserve to be read by playgoers who have any other than the most trivial interest in play-going."³ St. John Hankin, the playwright, declared that "they contain some of the most brilliant work he has ever done,"

¹Preface to Shaw's Dramatic Opinions and Essays, p. xix.

²Vol. 98 (April 13, 1907), p. 567.

³H. W. Boynton, vol. 99 (April, 1907), p. 558.

that they "survive the test of republication triumphantly," that "Time seems to have left no mark on them,"⁴ a judgment echoed in our own day by Edmund Wilson. Now these are remarkable tributes to a body of work essentially journalistic in character, breezy and colloquial in large part, and very far removed from that more serious and reflective type of dramatic criticism of which in English literature the Shakespearean analyses of Coleridge are probably the best example. Possibly Shaw's wit called them forth: There may be criticism more learned than his, but there is none more humorous; even a person who has not the slightest interest in the theatre, if only he have a sense of humor, can find amusement in it. But wit alone cannot fully explain the secret of its longevity, any more than the lack of wit can explain the oblivion which has been the fate of Max Beerbohm's dramatic criticism.

Paradoxically enough, it has retained its original interest by virtue of the very qualities which the purely objective type of critic (or the person who believes himself such) would feel compelled to denounce most strongly, and which do, in fact, make some of his reviews definitely unreliable. Taken singly, many of them simply give the effect of good dramatic criticism. Considered as a whole, they are not primarily dramatic criticism (to use the term narrowly) at all. They are what Shaw himself has called a siege and a crusade—an attempt to reform the theatre along certain lines which he had come to believe were best for it. Since most of the plays are considered in relation to this end, the reader soon comes to realize that his interest is fastened, not on some obscure play by Sydney Grundy, for example, but on a

⁴Fortnightly Review, vol. 87 (June, 1907), p. 1061.

theory of drama for the exposition of which this play is simply a peg. Thus, even when the play concerned has long since been forgotten, the criticism lives on, the vitality of its principles remaining unimpaired. This is what St. John Hankin was hinting at when he wrote of Shaw's articles: "...They are much more than merely brilliant. Underlying all their wit and irony, you find a sanity of judgment, a prevailing good sense, which brilliant criticism is apt to lack. Occasionally, of course, Mr. Shaw makes a 'gallery stroke' or overstates his case to enforce a point. But the total impression...is of a man grappling earnestly and seriously with the problems of the theatre in England, not of a humourist amusing himself and us at its expense. And that impression is very welcome. For it is this note of seriousness, of earnestness, that is so lamentably lacking in the dramatic criticism of today."⁵ We have already analysed the dramatic creed which Shaw expounded with clarity and force. It remains for us to re-state the value of that creed in terms of the influence which it has exerted on the modern theatre.

When Shaw claimed that the drama should be "an elucidator of social conduct" and "a factory of thought," he was simply repeating an idea as old as the theatre itself, and one which has been debated throughout all its history. Should dramatists be content to reflect—to imitate the actions of men which most vividly reflect the many facets of their character, while themselves remaining passively in the background, or should they arrange the plot and develop the characters so as to demonstrate the goodness or badness of a particular man's conduct or of a new social doctrine? In other words, is it

⁵Ibid., p. 1057.

enough that they expose, or must they also propose and dispose? Two thousand years ago, the poet-critic Horace, he of the "golden mean," looked at his measuring rod and answered sagely:

The poems void of profit our grave men
Cast out by voices; want they pleasure, then
Our gallants give them none, but pass them by;
But he hath every suffrage, can apply
Sweet mixt with sour to his readers, so
As doctrine and delight together go.⁶

Speaking broadly, it may be said that all great drama is in accord with this principle, for the simple reason that every faithful presentation of human character, as Corneille argued, carries with it its own lesson or measure of profit. If it is true that Shakespeare's portraits of certain types of men have never been rivalled, it is true as a consequence that Shakespeare is, in a very real sense, one of mankind's great teachers. But for those utilitarians who see in art an outlet for didacticism and propaganda, this is "teaching" only by courtesy and represents an evasion on the part of the dramatist, who quite clearly did not regard it as his primary objective. The history of aesthetics may be written in terms of this never-ending conflict between the broad and the narrow view (and the compromises between them) of the function of art.

It is no part of our purpose here to debate their merits or to choose between them. The thing to be emphasized, since it is so often forgotten, is that some of the world's greatest drama has, in varying degrees, been written from the latter point of view. The function, if not the tone, of Greek tragedy was certainly didactic; it was performed as part of a religious festi-

⁶"Epistle to the Pisos," (Ben Jonson's translation), ll.511-16.

val and served to illustrate the power of the gods by depicting the fate of those who sinned against them. And if Greek tragedy helped to stabilize the moral order, Greek comedy, in the satires of Aristophanes, did the same for the social order. Medieval drama, both in tone and in function, was thoroughly didactic, not only in its crude beginnings, but in the relatively polished phase which produced the timeless Everyman. Neo-classical French comedy, Aristophanic in conception, vigorously supported the social standards of its age, its rebellious Alcestes being offered as object lessons to eager audiences. There is nothing new, then, in calling for a drama which shall teach men—nor in achieving such a drama of a high artistic order. Drama has taught them. Of all the arts, none is better fitted to do so because of the universality of its appeal and the immediacy of its method. Nor is it unworthy of drama to put it to a didactic purpose, unless the primacy of its native end be challenged and all else be ruled out. Vital drama has always been in touch with the spirit of its age, and when that age has come to accept certain moral or social standards, they will be questioned or supported in the plays of that period, either tacitly or explicitly. When they are not, the drama will be decadent.

Bernard Shaw was not the first to realize that this was what had happened to the theatre of the nineteenth century. Dumas fils, Augier, Ibsen all clearly saw that it had not kept pace with the social and moral developments of its time, that it represented a belated romanticism which bore no relation to the problems of mankind in a most bewildering and rapidly changing "age of progress." But Shaw, more than anyone else, knew what could be

done to restore the theatre to its natural position of eminence in this respect, and to such a restoration he dedicated not only his criticism but his plays as well, the immense success of which testifies to the validity of his conclusions. To begin with, he insisted that playwrights reflect in their works the dominant problem of the age—man's relation to his environment—to society as it was then coming to be understood in the light of new movements in science and sociology. In this he was at one with all the realists, who substituted society for the gods or man's nature itself as the source of the new drama. That Shaw insisted wisely must be clear even from the sketch of earlier nineteenth-century drama already given—a drama which could claim no distinction whatever in the traditional patterns, and which, repeating itself weakly and ever more weakly, was in the gravest need of fresh subject matter. Unlike his colleagues in England, however, Shaw viewed the problems of society not as mere adjuncts for the same old patterns of drama—the same plots, the same type characters, etc., but as material with dramatic possibilities in itself, eager to respond to the touch of a man who was thinker enough to grasp its implications and playwright enough to embody them in effective situations and especially in dialogue which made much of its appeal directly to the intellect rather than to the emotions alone.⁷ In this respect Shaw

⁷Cf. the preface to Saint Joan (Works, vol. 17) for an elaboration of this idea. That Shaw was conscious of the novelty of his approach and of the attitude of conservative critics is clear from the following oft-expressed idea: "Nobody says 'I hate classical tragedy and comedy as I hate sermons and symphonies; but I like police news and divorce news or any kind of dancing or decoration that has an aphrodisiac effect...I cannot associate pleasure with any sort of intellectual activity; and I don't believe anyone else can either.' Such things are not said. Yet nine-tenths of what is offered as criticism of the drama in the metropolitan press of Europe and America is nothing but a muddled paraphrase of it. If it does not mean that, it means nothing." (pp. 54-5.)

was an innovator (technically there is nothing particularly "modern" about his works), for the idea of the "discussion," as he developed it, goes far beyond the limits and even the purpose of Ibsen. In his hands the problems of capital and labor, of science and philosophy, of church and state are every bit as dramatic as the conventional problems of lover-wife-husband or the stories of murder, adventure, and intrigue which are never absent from the stage. They are only less dramatic, in fact, than the very greatest kind of drama (in which the primary effect is emotional—and therefore universal—but is evoked by that rare creature who can strike at the very root of human emotions—a Sophocles, a Shakespeare, a Goethe, or an Ibsen), and are considerably more so than anything produced by the compromisers of the nineties. Accordingly, by demonstrating their fitness as subject matter for drama, Shaw broadened the scope of the theatre and brought to it a new intellectual maturity.

In this way he exerted a remarkable influence in England, both as critic and as playwright. The best and most serious works of the modern English theatre followed in the wake of his dramatic criticism, and there was a definite connection between the two. Holbrook Jackson, reviewing the progress of the theatre during the eighteen-nineties, expressed it in general terms:

If it takes more than two swallows to make a summer, it certainly takes more than two playwrights to make a dramatic renaissance. That being admitted, no one could say that the plays of Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw in themselves constituted a "new" drama. Such a definite achievement cannot be credited to the period. But what can be credited to the period is the creation of an atmosphere in which a new drama might flourish at the appointed hour. This was done by the art of criticism,

and chiefly by Bernard Shaw, William Archer, and J. T. Grein, whose example and ideal was Ibsen.⁸

The critic of the Spectator was more definite: "The chief thing to be remarked about these [Shaw's] dramatic criticisms," he wrote, "is that they supply one of the most notable examples of cause and effect modern literary history can show...If they had not been true in substance [they] could not have succeeded. As it is, his principles control the management of the Court Theatre, and account for its success. The Court Theatre of today is a repertoire theatre and a school of acting of a kind that London has never had before. It would be less than just not to give Mr. Shaw credit for all this."⁹ Shaw himself believed that the dramatic criticisms of the times effected a striking improvement in the tone of the English drama, although with genuine modesty he has credited it largely to Archer. Many years later, when Henderson asked him whether he felt that the high hopes of the reforming critics had been sustained, Shaw replied:

Yes, prodigiously. In the days when Archer was desperately pretending to cherish such high hopes to keep up our spirits, there were—leaving out the special case of Gilbert—only two playwrights worth mentioning: Pinero and Jones, and one adapter, Grundy. When Carton, Barrie, Oscar Wilde and I came along, the number of original playwrights was tripled without counting Buchanan and Stephen Phillips and Fagan, who were only occasional contributors. Four of these are dead; but the remaining six have been reinforced by Archer himself, by Galsworthy, Barker, Coward, Lennox, Robinson, Drinkwater, Ervine, Maugham, McEvoy, Glover, Munro, Sutton Vane, Clemence Dane, Milne, the late St. John Hankin, Zangwill, Housman, Eden Phillpotts, and quite a lot of busy young experimenters whose work I do not happen to have seen. If I had told Archer and Walkley in

⁸The Eighteen-Nineties, p. 205.

⁹Loc. cit.

1890 that we should live to see the day when it would be easy to reel off the names of more than twenty practicing English playwrights, (the worst of them much better than Grundy, and the best dozen immensely superior to Augier, Dumas fils, Sardou, and Co.) they would have thought me mad; and I should have agreed with them. The change for the better in the British drama in this century is more than a mere change: it is a Transfiguration.¹⁰

Although Shaw helped to guide the English drama to a greater maturity, he did not, however, succeed in arousing what he meant by social consciousness in playwrights, except in the noteworthy case of John Galsworthy. No one, not even Shaw himself, except possibly in his later works, wrote as didactically as he advocated in some of his criticism, and no one but Shaw adopted the philosophy which he declared to be the essence of Ibsenian realism. That playwrights were not willing to go to these latter extremes is not surprising, but that they refused to go at least as far as Galsworthy (who, after all, committed himself to no system) in the exposition of social problems is difficult to understand. At any rate, it is not to England that we must look for Shaw's influence on drama of a sociological nature, but to the United States.¹¹

To anyone who has studied the course of our drama in the last few years, the names of Elmer Rice, John Howard Lawson, Maxwell Anderson, Paul Green, Irwin Shaw, Robert Emmett Sherwood, Marc Blitzstein, and Clifford Odets suggest new and striking developments in the American theatre. They are not all "great" playwrights; one of them, indeed, has yet to prove himself even a fairly good one. But one thing they have in common—and they have it in

¹⁰Henderson, Table Talk of G.B.S., pp. 54-56.

¹¹In late years, however, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood have concerned themselves largely with social problems. They belong to that small band of dramatists who are attempting to adapt dramatic verse to the conditions of modern life.

large part from Shaw. They are all intensely interested in the political and economic aspects of society, and they have turned that interest into dramatic channels, to the decided enrichment of the national drama. They are dramatists with a "message," and although only one of them (Anderson) has openly declared his allegiance to Shaw's theories, all of them have attempted to make the theatre "immediately and dynamically useful" (the words are Odets'). Not all of them have written entirely in this vein, they share no common doctrine, and their degrees of didacticism vary. Elmer Rice is slowly retreating from the Left, Anderson and Sherwood represent a liberalism still groping for standards, Paul Green has concerned himself with the problems of labor and race prejudice, without committing himself to any definite policy, but the others, and the Group Theatre from which Odets sprung, have gone far to the Left in vividly expounding the doctrines of Marxism. (Lawson, a member of the Communist Party, has devoted almost as much time to the development of a Marxian aesthetic as to the writing of plays, at which he has not lately been successful.) No one can deny that Waiting for Lefty and Bury the Dead, for example, are essentially didactic; and yet even the person who disagrees most violently with their aims cannot escape consciousness of their dramatic power and vitality. Theirs, like Shaw's, is an essentially serious and worthy kind of drama, and while no one would care to see an art as broad as human nature itself confined to any one pattern, still less should any one want to deny this kind of drama (whatever its "message") a definite place in the theatre. These playwrights have explored only a few of its potentialities, but some of their works have been among the finest in the last decade

of theatrical history. They have proved again the validity of the larger aspects of Shavian dramatic theory, which in turn is as old as drama itself, and which Shaw simply adapted to the conditions of modern times.¹²

Shaw's influence on other critics is much harder to trace. As far as English criticism is concerned, no apparent successor to G.B.S. has yet made himself known. His mantle seems to have fallen here again to Americans, who have divided it amongst themselves, losing, in the process, the largest part of it. They have adopted his mannerisms, his irony and biting wit, his air of omniscience, and his destructive tendencies, but the principles which motivated these qualities they have either refashioned or discarded completely. It would be idle to pretend that even here there are any critics like him who have approached his level of excellence. James Gibbons Huneker, a pure impressionist now almost forgotten, introduced Shaw's dramatic criticism to this country, but himself remained untouched by its principles. H. L. Mencken whom Shaw once thought very promising, has often been called a disciple of Nietzsche and Bernard Shaw, but his impressionism and his peculiar kind of political conservatism are not Shavian—only his tone is. And even in this respect Mencken is much further from Shaw than the writer who above all others has caught Shaw's style in all its external aspects—the irrepressible and inexhaustible George Jean Nathan. Change the names of the plays and the actors in some of his reviews to fit the productions of the nineties, tell an unsuspecting student of Shaw that they are the work of the master, and it will

¹²The Catholic Theater Movement resulted from a recognition of the influence exerted on public opinion by certain playwrights of the Left. Whether or not it will make any contribution to the national drama, however, remains to be seen.

be some time before he discovers the fraud. Consider, for example, the following discussion of Paul Vincent Carroll's last play, a review which appeared in a national magazine (and a weekly, too!) only two months ago:

Paul Vincent Carroll, the Glasgow bon vivant and winner of the Critics' Circle's accolades for his "Shadow and Substance" and "The White Steed," has come to the local market with a third try. Its name is KINDRED. I outlined it to you upon an advance reading of the manuscript six months ago, so I do not have to reinform you that it not only is a very bad but a quite silly play. It is also, as almost anyone could have forewarned, and as some, including my friendly if graceless self, did forewarn its author, a theatrical failure. It couldn't be otherwise, and for these reasons.

First, its argument that only if artists inherit the earth will the earth at length be redeemed is the thoroughest sort of snobbery and eminently nonsensical. Second to no one in my esteem for the creative artistic spirit, I nevertheless tremble to think of a world left to any such management. The notion, for example, that Mark Twain would have constituted a better President of the United States than Grover Cleveland or even that Maxwell Bodenheim could lay out highways and parkways a heap more satisfactorily than Robert Moses—that notion is Carroll's for one beer. Secondly, his sneer at business men as the scum of the earth is foolish to the point of burlesque. Businessmen like Rockefeller, Carnegie, Guggenheim, et al., have done infinitely more for the improvement of the human spirit—indeed more for even the arts—than ten times their number in surrealist painters, jazz opera composers, and blank verse poeticians. Thirdly, his dramatic devices drafted to project his thesis amount in sum to as dog-eared a collection as has been vended in a hefty spell; he doesn't miss a trick. They are all present: hair-tossing and contemptuous painter, seduction of servant girl, suicide, ghosts of ancestors, sensitive violinist, low-comedy maidservant, tennis playing juveniles, sound of off-stage band, fist fights, mother's sanctimonious pan illuminated by spotlight, entrance of police, clapped-on handcuffs, jokes involving synonym for donkey, etc., etc.¹³

There is more in the same vein, but this is enough for the purpose. It is

¹³Newsweek, vol. 15, p. 38. (January 8, 1940.)

almost incredible how much of this is the Shavian style. The resemblance is not merely verbal; the thought itself is akin to Shaw's: Detestation of the pretentious in art, a strong respect for practical achievement, scorn for the obviously conventional in stage technique as well as for blank verse—all of these ideas recur again and again in Shaw's criticism. But there the resemblance ends. Mr. Nathan has a perfect right to be destructive—and there are times when he seems bent on destroying everything, a favorite pastime of smart journalism during the decade which gave him his reputation. But when, unlike Shaw, he stops with destruction, without ever confessing the principles behind it and the order he is hoping to achieve, he forfeits the confidence of the intelligent reader, whom he leaves without any guide to the vagaries of his most quixotic mind.

When Shaw's criticism is imitated for its external properties only, it loses its real value, which is to lead drama, to be a driving force in its evolution rather than a mere record of its history. The only reason that Shaw is tolerable in some of his denunciations is that the reader has been warned beforehand not to expect pure objectivism. This is what Shavian criticism should mean today: It is an invitation to the skilled critics of a new age (but only to them) who have realized what in the theatre needs to be revived to work for their objective as he did for his. It does not mean that critics in general are not to strive for greater and greater objectivity; a theatre full of Saturday Reviewers would be as intolerable as a drama written wholly by social-didacticists. But it is more than an invitation; it is also a warning. The critic who makes this approach his own must be willing

to pay its price—which is intellectual honesty. He must expose his aim and confess his standards, for only then may he look for the respectful attention of the judicious reader. And since "pure" dramatic criticism is almost as impossible to achieve as "pure" literary criticism (at least for any work dealing with vital spiritual and social problems) and as undesirable, even the critic who is not consciously expounding any doctrine might well emulate Shaw in confessing the fundamental principles and prejudices that guide his judgment when he is evaluating, not the construction of a play, but the ideas behind it. Shavian criticism, like Shaw himself, stands for some things that are foolish and for many that are wise. Yet not the least of its glories is that all of it, good and bad alike, rests on the only foundation strong enough to support criticism of any kind and indeed the fullness of life itself.

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